

Cuk-40453-14-V2146861

# THE CALCUTTA JOURNAL OF POLITICAL STUDIES

---

New Series

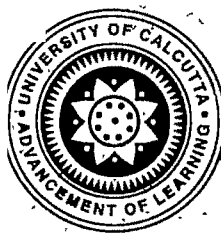
Vol. 5 & 6 Nos. 1 & 2

April 2005—March 2007

---



*Democratic Governance in Indian States*



Department of Political Science  
Calcutta University  
2008

# THE CALCUTTA JOURNAL OF POLITICAL STUDIES

## Editorial Board

### Chairman

Professor Dhrubojyoti Chattopadhyay  
Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs

### Editor

Professor Dipak Kumar Das

### Members

Prof. Rakshahari Chatterji

Prof. Sobhanlal Datta Gupta

Prof. Amartya Mukhopadhyay

Prof. Samir Kumar Das

Dr. Sanjeeb Mukherjee

### Secretary

Dr. Dhurjati Prasad De  
Secretary, University Colleges of Arts and Commerce

---

*The Calcutta Journal of Political Studies* is published twice a year by the Department of Political Science, University of Calcutta. The Journal publishes original work in all fields of political science.

Contributions are accepted for publication on condition that these have not been published or submitted for publication elsewhere. The Journal does not hold itself responsible for statements made and data used by the contributors. Unless so stated, material in the Journal does not necessarily reflect the views of the Editorial Board or of the Department of Political Science.

Manuscript : Two high quality copies (hard and soft) should be submitted. Articles must be typed on one side of the paper only with double spacing and wide margins and the pages must be numbered. References should be listed at the end of the paper.

Communication on general editorial matters, including manuscripts for publication, printed matter and books for review should be sent to :

The Editor  
The Calcutta Journal of Political Studies  
Department of Political Science  
Calcutta University, Alipore Campus  
Kolkata - 700 027

---

Annual Subscription : Rs. 50.00 in India

]

# THE CALCUTTA JOURNAL OF POLITICAL STUDIES

---

New Series

Vol. 5&6 Nos. 1&2

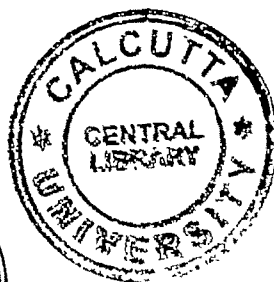
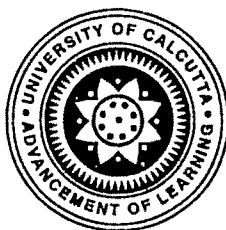
April 2005—March 2007

---



*Editor*

Dipak Kumar Das



DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

CALCUTTA UNIVERSITY

2008

G-146361

## THE CALCUTTA JOURNAL OF POLITICAL STUDIES

---

New Series

Vol. 5&6 Nos. 1&2

April 2005—March 2007

---

### CONTENTS

Editor's Note		v
From the Head's Desk		vii
Democracy in Search of Dignity	: Gopal Guru	1
Democracy and "Governance" in the Wake of Mass Upsurge	: Javeed Alam	14
Violating Rights or Righting Violations? Notes on a Critique of Democratic Governance in Contemporary India	: Samir Kumar Das	33
'e' Anyway?: Critical Reflections on the e-Governance Roadmap in Andhra Pradesh	: Dipankar Sinha	44
Civil Social Institutions in and for India: A Poet's View and After	: Amartya Mukhopadhyay	65
Evaluating 'Kalyani' and Community Radio Policy in India: Images of Alternate Empowerment from Gram Bangla?	: Bonita Aleaz	84
Book Review		99

---

Editor : Dipak Kumar Das

### *Editor's Note*

This is a special issue on 'Democratic Governance in Indian States', the theme which constitutes the thrust area of our Department's UGC-DRS Programme (Phase-I) for the period 2004-09. Over the last four years (2005-08) as many as eighteen papers came out under the auspices of this Programme. From amongst these we have chosen five for inclusion in this special issue of the Journal. Of course this selection is not wholly arbitrary. The papers being published here are predominantly theoretical, and a common thread binds them together. True, each of them can be read as an independent and self-contained argument from either modernist or critical modernist or orthodox Marxist perspective but at the same time each highlights a different facet of the debate on the same issue. Apart from these papers, this edition of the Journal contains a special article attempting an assessment of the community radio policy in India on the basis of a concrete case study and the regular section on book review.

A long time has elapsed since the publication of the last issue of this Journal in 2005. As the responsibility for this inordinate delay is largely none else's than mine, I refrain from offering any explanation in expiation of my lapse. I beg sincerely to be excused for it. However, the responsibility for any error, conceptual or syntactic, in the articles published here lies with those who have authored them.

### *From the Head's Desk*

I feel pleased to put in a few words as Head about our Department in the current issue of *The Calcutta Journal of Political Studies*.

The UGC-DRS Programme (Phase-1) of the Department has been running at full throttle. In the first four years the total number of occasional papers have been as many as eighteen, of which twelve are based on researches done by the faculty, four are monographs by visiting DRS fellows, and two are compilations of papers presented by students in Students' Seminars. This excludes a book edited by Dr. Dipankar Sinha and Smt. Kaberi Chakrabarty, titled *Democratic Governance in India: Reflections and Refractions* (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2007). The output speaks volumes of the robust health of the DRS, more so as the preceding and the present Vice Chancellor, and the yearly appraisal team from the UGC have handsomely praised the DRS Programme and its activities, including the quality of the publications. Actually the UGC team has in one voice advised their publication within edited hard covers. And the Honourable Vice Chancellor has assured that the University Press will do the printing. True to this spirit, the present issue of the journal will be devoted to these occasional papers, except for only one. The idea is to make these writings available to a wider reading public.

Coming to the Ph.D. Programme of the Department, between 2005 and 2008 about eight candidates were registered. Some of the themes of the researches were quite interesting, namely, identity politics in Mizoram, media representations of the Left Front Government in West Bengal, empowerment of Muslim women, social and political philosophy of Jainism, politics of river bank erosion in selected districts of West Bengal, participatory planning in rural West Bengal, globalization and the government employees in West Bengal, Indo-US nuclear relations etc.

During this period about seven candidates submitted their these for adjudication and/or were awarded degrees, the themes being: communist movement in selected districts of West Bengal, decentralization and development with reference to the Panchyati Raj System in Manipur, a comparative study of rural local-government in Bangladesh and West Bengal, Subhas Chandra Bose and the Bengal revolutionaries, political process and political behaviour with reference to the Lepchas, a study of Indira Gandhi's leadership in India's democracy, the concept of nationalism and internationalism in Tagore and Gandhi.

The information furnished here clearly indicates that the Ph.D. programme of the Department encourages research in some of the most representative areas of Political Science, namely, identity politics, decentralisation and local government, tribal and ethnic politics, politics of development, political leadership in India, nationalist thought in India, Left politics in India etc. West Bengal being a major focal point of investigation.

During this period Professor Asok Kumar Mukhopadhyay (now retired), Professor Prabhat Datta, and Professor Sobhanlal Datta Gupta (now retired) shouldered the responsibility of the Convenor of the Ph.D. Committee in succession. Professor Tapan Chattopadhyay is the present Convener.

The Departmental M. Phil Programme has also been overhauled. At present there are four papers in the programme. While Paper—I: Research Methodology is mandatory for the students, they have options in the other three papers on Political Theory and Political Sociology (Paper II), Comparative and Indian Politics (Paper III), and Public Administration and International Relations (Paper IV). Amartya Mukhopadhyay is the programme coordinator.

The M.A. Syllabus has been thoroughly revised. Now it has eight papers divided into 25 mark courses.

The Departmental academic calendar has been reshuffled in a way that it tallies with the best all-India pattern.



# DEMOCRACY IN SEARCH OF DIGNITY

Gopal Guru

In the present paper I am going to make three arguments. *First*, democracy works as the condition within which dignity as the moral good could be realized. *Second*, for the realization of dignity, it is necessary for the civil society to absorb democracy within itself. In other words, democracy has to annihilate the hierarchies that are present in the kind of civil society that we have in India. In this presentation I am making an argument that it is not desirable to throw everything into the basket of civil society, which may not be too hospitable to democratic concerns. *Finally*, the paper argues that democracy may fail in sustaining the context of dignity primarily because it could be overwhelmed by a kind of civil society that has evolved in India. The paper argues that it is not democracy that orients and shapes civil society but as far as the Indian context is concerned it is the latter that seems to have overdetermined the former. Before we discuss these three issues, it is necessary to delineate the concept of dignity.

There could be at least three ways to understand the concept of dignity. Taking cue from Kant<sup>1</sup>, dignity could be understood in moral terms. It is related to the moral ability of a person to act. To put differently, the failure to act would lead to the loss of dignity. However, to act is not arbitrary. A particular act, when viewed in relation to dignity, gets motivated by the normative principle of comparative worth. Unless a person develops the sense of comparison with self and the others, he or she cannot establish the claim for dignity. Dignity emanates from the desire to acquire equal worth. Dignity, used in this sense, acquires an evaluative character, which, in turn, presupposes the necessity to lay down normative criterion around which social protocols could be organized. Thus, dignity is a kind of claim that needs to be confirmed and communicated. One seeks to communicate this claim through the language of rights. Rights are morally necessary in the sense that without them we would have no ground to attribute to a person an absolute and irreplaceable dignity. Assertion of rights against discrimination embedded in both the state practices and civil society becomes the precondition for the realization of dignity. Assertion involves a moral stamina to face dire consequences that would follow from a particular action. Establishing dignity claim thus involves a heavy price. To put it simply, it can lead to wide-ranging response from mental torture to physical annihilation by the tormentors who refuse to recognize these rights. Assertion of democratic rights costs heavily to dalit community which lost five young motivated Dalits of Veluwalu village panchayat in Madurai district of

---

Dr. Guru is Professor of Political Science in the Centre for Political Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Tamil Nadu and Bhavaridevi from Rajasthan had to pay a heavy price for asserting their democratic rights. Thus a loss of dignity can occur on account of the failure to take initiative and act for establishing and upholding normative social order based on equality and dignity. Dignity as mentioned in the beginning is an irreducible universal principle. Failure to conform to these universal normative principles also leads to the loss of self respect, and hence is inwardly directed. Conforming to these principles demands confrontation with the structure of domination and oppression.

Dignity, which becomes a possibility in the context of the above universal principle, acquires modern liberal character in as much as it is different from the conventional idea of honour. Honour anticipates both hierarchical structures and reverence to such structure based, for example, on caste and gender discrimination. In other words, honour basically feeds on the repulsive subordination of the other. On the other hand, dignity gets defined in terms of the individualist principle 'one person one value'. This principle could be realized basically in democratic framework, which seeks to flatten all premodern hierarchies that give rise to differential notion of social/moral value. Democratic framework is expected to separate political institutions from the hierarchical social institutions that seek to relegate certain social groups to inferiority governed by structural rigidities that renew and underlie indignities. However, in democracy, individuals can acquire generic identity to move into different spheres with different identity. This becomes possible through rationalized rotation of political institutions.

To put it differently, modernity decides the conditions of dignity. Formation of the modern identity plays an important role in creating an urge for dignity. In fact dignity emerges or becomes the possibility only through the complex mediation between the particular and the universal identities. Particular is given while universal is self-consciously chosen. Taking moral initiative to move out from the given or ascribed identity into the adopted or acquired identity thus forms the precondition of dignity. Autonomy thus forms the moral basis of the self as an independent thinking and acting being. Thus, dignity lies in the demand for recognition to appear in the public sphere without the sense of shame or shrinking body language. As mentioned above, this demand, in turn, is based on an egalitarian principle 'one person one value'. Dignity as the motivating moral good for self-definition, thus, presupposes an ability to demand equal recognition, for example, to matter and matter equally in the democratic sphere in particular and public sphere in general. To put it differently, resistance to any kind of objectification is the surest attempt to restore dignity. Right to resistance is one of the important negative rights for those who are denied the opportunity to be heard seriously, to be touched affectionately and warmly. Rights in order to become rights require a precondition within which they could be realized. Democracy offers this

condition within which rights could be asserted and established and ultimately dignity could be ensured.

Under liberal democracy, state and public institutions are supposed to treat all citizens equally, regardless of caste, religion and sex or other cultural particularities. Democracy as the modern standard of evaluation also assigns equal worth to all institutions. To put it differently, all institutions enjoy equal importance in as much as they act impartially and hence retain their universal character. There is a symbiotic relationship between the structures and the persons who occupy these structures. Differently put, institutions acquire their character from persons, and persons in turn acquire meaning only within the institutional structures. Persons occupying these structures subtract their worth from the latter and vice versa. In the pre-modern society, structures drew their substance and essence from the individual or feudal lords who happened to occupy it. Structures were known by those who occupied them. In democracy, the structures of power are empty, and are at least theoretically occupied through the process of rotation. Similarly, decentralization of structures and power could also be seen as the condition for realizing the dignity through assertion and participation. In centralized power structures, there is scope for sycophancy which is the opposite of dignity. However, as Upendra Baxi<sup>2</sup> says, all forms of sycophancy are not objectionable on grounds of dignity. We shall deal with this point at some length in the following sections. Suffice it to say that democracy as a value installs a sense of dignity in the institutions. That is to say, institutions begin to acquire some kind of worth to them through adhering to formal rationality. This universal rationality which keeps out unreasonable biases should constitute the background principle for the institutional dignity. Let me thus summarize: democracy provides the background condition for the realization of dignity. The question that needs to be addressed is to what extent democracy in India has succeeded in restoring dignity to different social groups? Before we answer this question it is interesting to outline at some length the trajectory of the relationship between democracy and dignity in India.

It is interesting to note that the concept of democracy as the desirable arrangement did not enjoy wholehearted support from those thinkers and leaders who were leading India's struggle for independence. In fact, it represented the breakdown of coherence in the position that the thinkers took on democracy during the freedom struggle. The nationalist leaders rightly pressed for complete democracy from the colonial rule. The demand for self-rule epitomized the democratic aspirations of the Indian people. However, this demand was not pushed to its logical end. Some of the prominent leaders looked quite hesitant to pass on the package of democracy to their own people who were thrown on to the margin of democracy. For example, Bal Gangadhar Tilak expressed his discomfort with the idea of the service caste (*Teli and Tamboli*), in today's parlance the Mandal Caste, going to the Legislative council in

colonial India.<sup>3</sup> He did not seem to be in favour of democratization of the social and political structures, perhaps he might have thought that the OBC caste does not have required competence to deliberate in democratic functioning. Ironically, Tilak's slogan, "Freedom is my birth right", presupposed democratic structures privileging the participation of the top of the twice born. OBC could be the source of disorder for the democratic set-up.

It is also equally interesting to note that some of the non-Brahmin thinkers held the elitist view of democracy in India. For example, Vithal Ramji Shinde, one of the leading Bahujan thinkers, otherwise known for his serious work among the untouchables, somehow suggested dalit participation by nomination and not by election.<sup>4</sup> Both Tilak and Shinde seem to be sequencing democracy as modern condition. In such view modernity has to follow a particular trajectory. According to this view, certain social groups like the lower castes are supposed to acquire, first, necessary competence to participate in the democratic function of the society. This kind of understanding suggested that social groups or people lacking this competence are bound to mess up with democracy and hence need to be kept away from the business of democracy. However, the relentless struggle on the part of the dalits and the Bahujan leaders like Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar, forced the nationalists to expand the social base of democracy by removing the exclusionary conditionalities. Of course the political need to produce conjecture also forced these nationalist leaders to change the sequence of modernity. That is to say, the nationalist leaders had to accommodate in the democratic process those social groups which were not yet qualified to participate in it.

However, it is quite ironic to note, this modernist view of democracy by its very logic reproduces forms of exclusion even within the deprived sections which fought against this exclusion at the first instance. Modernist view of democracy leads to continuous exclusion of people. In other words, such elitist view is not culturally specific and can produce Tilak and Shinde even from among the leaders 'representing' subaltern politics. The elitists from among the dalit, for example, suggest the capacity to deliberate on and maintain decorum as the precondition to participate in the democratic processes. They humiliated and ridiculed those dalits who according to the former did not possess the capacity to deliberate. It is unfortunate to note that this modernist mood of democracy divided the dalit party (RPI), at least in Maharashtra, into those who claimed to be the carrier of this modern political identity and those who seemingly lack the deliberative capacity to participate in democratic politics. Interestingly, the former were called as *sutbutwallas* (a local name for the modern politicians in three-piece suit attire) and the latter as the *Dhotarwale*, the rustic, illiterate lacking competence in parliamentary procedures. The struggles led by the latter variety of leadership were treated by the modernist dalit leadership as unconstitutional. The moral question that needs to be raised is: why do victims of indignity reproduce the same

mechanism of humiliation against which they fought at the first instance? There could be three reasons: First, such leaders require constructing others as inferior in order to define the former as superior. Thus it is this self-awareness of being different that makes the modernist to use democratic pretext to run down others. Secondly, such people are driven by the notion of perfect democracy that by implication sets disempowering standards of democratic practice. They expect people to follow these standards without investing much in building up these democratic capacities. They fail to appreciate the compulsion of democracy. In fact any revolutionary leaders invest in converting compulsion into conviction. To put it differently, they are impatient with modernist aspect of democracy. They want everybody to acquire the capacity to produce arguments based on reason. Since most people are latecomers to cultural modernity (education) it would be safe to argue that while the external articulation of democratic concern is emotional (in the name of Ambedkar they are ready to make supreme sacrifice) the inner dimension is normative in as much as it seeks one man - one value and not just one man - one vote. That is to say, the *Dhotarwala* leaders may not be modern in their articulation but very much egalitarian to the core and hence enjoyed immense support among the common dalit masses.

This elitist reading of democracy, however, had implications for the dignity of the deprived section - women, *shudras* and dalits. Complete exclusion from participation and inclusion by nomination essentially suggested the damage to dignity of these groups. In fact, Ambedkar understood this very clearly and did raise the question of dignity quite squarely. He argued that dalits would not feel free if elected to the council through nomination.<sup>5</sup> They, he further argued, would be under the obligation of the patron. If one chooses to define democracy in terms of the condition providing space for freedom and self-determination, then one can understand Ambedkar's skepticism of democracy by patronage. Participation by election would presuppose that everybody has equal moral worth to elect the candidate, even the wrong candidate. It can even be argued that they might make mistake in electing candidate but right to commit mistake is an important right that can guarantee dignity in as much as it assigns autonomy and subjectivity to a person. Those who are handpicked by the dominant parties can hardly claim to be enjoying dignity. This could be understood even in the contemporary context which has implications for dalit and even feminist dignity. We shall come back to this point a little later. Let us examine how democracy has flattened the social hierarchies within the background principle "one man one value". To what extent did it undermine the social hierarchies that militate against dignity of persons and social groups?

As mentioned above, the Indian constitution has provided enabling provisions that are aimed at flattening the age-old hierarchies. Very textualization of dignity through various constitutional provisions sought to keep the civil society on tenterhooks. This could be seen in a number of

provisions that removed feudal titles and untouchability, and established social equality through reservation provision. The institutional structures that were expected to fulfil the constitutional promise were supposed to enjoy equal recognition of the political community. At least at the abstract level all structures were equally worthy of respect and recognition from the political community. The state itself was considered to be a democratic state in as much as it promised to remain above the partisan concerns. If at all it was partisan that was because of the concerns of justice. Thus state partisanship could be defended on the grounds that it provided reservation provisions to the weaker sections of the society. This partisan aspect could also be defended on the ground that it promised to expand the democratic content of institutions and social life. If one were to take a subsidized view of the success of India's democracy one could grant the point that democracy did help the deprived to gain dignity to them. They now in most part of the country can appear without the sense of shame. They can hold on to the public space with confidence. One could possibly argue that democratic practice in India helped, though in limited sense, in detoxifying the public spaces of the notion of purity-pollution. It is perhaps unusual to use caste-based language in the public sphere. And yet, the dignity of these groups is at stake. The democratic framework and the related institutions have resulted in reproducing the incidences of indignities.

The adoption of democratic framework enables people to elevate them from the natural or the immediate (walking carcass) to the mediated universal (citizens). This mediation gives rise to the principle of one person one value, thus discarding the feudal notion of hierarchical worth in favour of equal worth. Thus, everybody gets the universal recognition as equal citizens. People are supposed to get this equal recognition without any conditionalities, that there is no extra-constitutional authority that extracts from the society an evidence of good citizens. An element of compulsion and coercion is ruled out as one is entitled to enjoy equal recognition. The reciprocal recognition becomes a possibility because of the moral force behind it. In democracy the recognition is procedural or given; one does not have to acquire it or establish it as it accrues from social contract concluded in 1947 in the Indian case. Once one is defined by the Indian constitution, one need not discover what one is. It is taken for granted that people will enjoy their universal identity through mutual recognition.

The experience with India's democracy, particularly during the last six years, shows that certain social sections had to spend their political and intellectual energy just to refuse the way they are perceived. In other words, these sections have been struggling to establish that they are not the untouchables or the walking carcass. In the Indian context and even in the American context, some social groups are denied this equal recognition. They are reduced from the universal to the contaminating (walking carcass)

particular. This reduction eventually leads the victims to launch the struggle (both ontological with the self and deontological with the others) to prove what they are not. Also what they are. The dalits or women have to prove that they are not walking carcass or *abala* in the latter case. Some of the women and dalits continue to fight the attempts that involve prefixing with their names—for example, dalit president or dalit intellectual. Ironically, they are also forced to prove what they are (in fact the entire identity politics in India is built up around this struggle to prove what one is). Let me argue here that unfortunately the struggle to prove what one is has got resilience over the struggle to prove what one is not. The first kind of struggle is relatively easy but costs dearly as far as dignity is concerned. Identity struggle does not subscribe to or make it positively avoids difficult routes to success. In such struggles, social groups and their leaders tend to fall back upon the following routes that are considered as short cut to mobility and success. These are the language of rhetoric rather than rigour and identity rather than ideas, free rider rather than austere and strategic importance. This attempt to hold on to identity for gaining favours of different kinds, however, has to meet one condition, that is, the state distributes moral and other resources like recognition not on the strict criterion of modernity but on the need to appear benevolent. This works out to the mutual benefits of both the patron (state) and its clientele. Thus, the state violates the conditions of modernity by choosing beneficiaries for the strategic reasons while the clientele or the recipient of the favour lose self-esteem by offering to subordinate themselves to the patron. In other words, adherence to modernity, both by the state and the individual, would guarantee both of them a sense of dignity. One gets recognition and appreciation not out of any strategic reason but out of conviction. Since the state itself promotes mediocrity for its own populist reason, people find it easy to resort to less difficult and painful route of resurrecting identity through invoking personal life histories. Such people treat jumping around or impressing upon the influential people less costly. It is here such people develop a stake in self-humiliation. This is done with the double purpose of compensating for the modernist deficiencies on the one hand and seeking sympathy, if not recognition, on the other. If democracy is robust, genuine appreciation becomes a possibility. If it is not and is based on competitive populism, then the first causality is dignity. Let me explain this in the following sections through throwing some light on the scramble to prove what one is (dalit autobiographies are the evidence of this struggle for 'recognition').

The Indian state stands on the paradox in the sense that while on the one hand it is expanding the democratic content of institutional structures, on the other the democratic expansion comes with heavy moral cost. It retains its democratic image only at the cost of undermining the dignity of those who are the beneficiaries of the welfare provisions. This humiliating aspect of the state is evident from various kinds of verification practices that the state

undertakes. Caste verification is one such practice that is regularly conducted by the state on a very legitimate-looking ground that it wants to check and avoid anomalies in the implementation of reservation policy in India.<sup>5</sup> The state may not force a particular target-group to line up for the identification parade, and the group itself might volunteer for such parade, yet the net result is that they appear as though they themselves are guilty. They have to appear before the state periodically. This is just like the 'thadipar' (deported) criminals who are supposed to give fresh evidence to the police station of their being innocent. (According to NDTV reporting, in Andhra Pradesh, dalit hostellers are forced to undergo the computer and camera test, the photograph of their eyes is taken. The reason behind this photography is not to give them a sense of glamour but to tighten surveillance on them. The officials seek to justify it on the ground that it will help the government in avoiding malpractice in the distribution of welfare scheme). The identification parade has two serious implications for dignity. First, identification perpetuates the meaning that certain identifications are related to fixed attributions like colour and caste. Through identification one gets chained to one's sociological identity. And the caste certificate becomes the necessary proof of one's identity. Let me give some more examples of dalits who seemingly occupy higher posts in liberal structures. They keep referring to their particular social background and the family stories. The narratives on embattled family life acquire articulation without any sense of shame. It is completely un-modernist as modernity replaces any need for reference to past experience. This has implication for dignity as such references can invoke sympathy which evaluates person not on equal ground but on unequal grounds always giving the advantage of superiority to those who are the source of assigning sympathy to others. The question that needs to be asked is why do people compromise with their dignity? Is it because that there is lack of robust democracy that is known for its capacity to follow the strict criterion of distributing moral resources keeping in view the need for dignity? In the Indian case, since we have not been able to follow robust democracy, we have been faced with a peculiar predicament which suggests that whatever is gained in the formal realm is lost in the material. One can now understand as to why dalits, *adivasis* and women fail to sustain their dignity through formal democratic arrangement.

Such public confession and identification parade becomes a liability or ontological wound for those whose modernist claims get undermined through such identification. But for those who lack modernist confidence caste certificate becomes an asset to compensate for various kinds of deficiencies. Despite the fact one is guaranteed autonomy by the democratic framework, but at the concrete level one loses this autonomy as one who is the beneficiary of the welfarism gets constituted and overdetermined by the state. Overdetermination by an institution or by an individual leads to the loss of self-respect of those who are in question.<sup>8</sup> One is disciplined through



verification which could be treated as a definite step towards to 'good governance'. It is humiliating for those who are singled out for such identification parade. The association of demeaning description with the body in effect leads to a kind of ontology in which stigma gets chained to a personality irrespective of its location both in time and space. This identification parade leads to the violation of the egalitarian principle - 'one person-one value'. As the above case shows different people are treated differently. Second, *this by implication denies a person an advantage of generic identity. Thus, in democracy, one finds people appearing with prefix attached to their name-dalit President, or Mahila sarpanch, so on and so forth. He/she is known not by different names but by the one to which a person is attached.*

This struggle to prove what one is, has to be understood in terms of the everyday forms of self-abasement, self-negation or self-misrecognition and the deployment of sycophancy, by certain sections like women, dalit and *adivasis*. Sycophancy does cause damage to one's identity. As mentioned above, not all types of sycophancy causes damage to dignity. Sycophancy arises in a situation where there is complete dominance of either a person or a group of persons or the dominant section of society. Democracy does create a sense of self-worth among the people through the language of rights and autonomy. To this extent sycophancy should be marginal to any democratic set-up. Yet, we have sycophancy which demands submission to the self-awareness of the dominant. Look at this statement-'Indira is India'. Sycophancy suggests the depletion of moral resources that are defined in terms of endurance of frustration and suffering. Those who can endure can avoid being sycophant. Sycophants need to communicate to the powerful that they are inferior to the former. They have to publicly acknowledge that they are obliged to the favour that is done to them by the patron. Look at the cutouts and public functions held in honour of the patron. In sycophancy, one is not true to oneself. Sycophancy rests on self-deception and not on self-respect. People deliberately decide to act as dumb before their party bosses. If we have self-effacing personality in politics perhaps one can avoid or control the menace of sycophancy.

Certain social groups or people within that group choose to abuse themselves publicly. In the situation where the discrimination is systemic, the dalits do not choose to fight. Actually they are forced to live with the prefix. For example, a dalit *sarpanch* from one of the Andhra districts cleans the entire village before he resumes his office as a *sarpanch*. One can imagine how the upper caste casteist gaze summarily damages his dignity.<sup>9</sup> Or a dalit *sarpanch* woman from a village in Niphad taluka of Nasik district has to endure humiliation heaped on her by the upper-caste sarpanch who was defeated by her in the local panchayat election. The notion of free-rider is an opposite of dignity. While in the first case, it is the free-rider who loses his/her dignity as he or she does not contribute to his/her, for example, electoral success. It

is the dominant politics that is responsible for the electoral success. We shall discuss this point in greater details in the following sections. Electoral politics and resultant democratic forms have created a paradoxical situation in India. On the one hand, this politics offers an opportunity to include those who otherwise would not have dreamt of participation. But on the other hand, they, by and large, do not acquire authentic voice. They ironically develop a stake in their humiliation. Acting smart would cause them whatever little power that they tend to enjoy. Such situation suggests that power flows from subordination and not domination. Let me cite two stories from democratic experience in Karnataka. A dalit coolie was picked up by the Congress party and was elected to the state assembly from the Gokak constituency of north Karnataka. He was chosen against a candidate who was known for a strong sense of autonomy and self-determination. Ironically, this dalit lost his dignity for interrelated factors. First, as free rider (because he could get elected on the votes of the upper caste) and second, this obligation of the party rendered him a mute member of the legislative assembly. He further slid down on the scale of dignity when he refused to occupy the seat and kept on sitting on the floor of the house, thus conforming to his social location that was lowest in the caste hierarchy. He could not assert his claim on the chair because he did not contribute to his electoral success. He lost his dignity as he became the 'free rider' of the patronage of the upper caste. Representation by proxy is the close cousin of the category of free-rider. The political participation of women through reservation at the PR level seems to have brought assertion and confidence in them. Most of them like Gundabai Ahirwar from Tikamgarh District of MP restored her dignity by hoisting the flag much against the upper-caste opposition. There are several success stories but they are exceptions and have not become the rule. Yet, we also come across expression like *Sarpanch Pati* (husband) as the *de facto* sarpanch<sup>10</sup>. Those husbands who have migrated to different places have maintained their hold on all their spouses through what could be called long-distance patriarchy.<sup>11</sup>

It is not that only different people or social groups are treated differently, even democratic institutions are treated differently and unequally. That is to say, institutions do not enjoy equal respect by both the political community and also the civil society. For example, in comparison to the general constituencies the reserved constituencies are not treated with dignity.<sup>12</sup> They have become the dumping ground for the dominant political players who dump in the reserved constituencies undesirable parts of their general constituency through gerrymandering.<sup>13</sup> Even candidates from outside are also dumped on these constituencies. The case of Jalore reserved constituency in Rajasthan is one recent example that indicates a person being dumped all the way from Andhra Pradesh. Why is not a reserved constituency subject to intense election campaign? Or why does such constituency receive only the contempt of the upper caste and 'their' bureaucracy? Is it because their social background is

lower caste? Let me give another interesting example to show how TTB has been produced in the realm of democratic institutions. Among the institutional set-up, the ministry of social welfare enjoys the least respect from the members of civil and political community. In fact, it is treated as the contaminated place where both the dalits and non-dalits are least enthusiastic to seek posting. Of course, they dislike social ministry entirely for different purposes. The non-dalits treat it as a kind of 'punishment' which is treated equal to 'Kalapani'.

In both the perceptions (dalit and non-dalit) one thing is common. That both these modes suggest the continuity between the ghetto and the public institutions, which flies into the face of democracy's claims to undermine the hierarchies based on the ideology of purity-pollution. The sense of indignity deepens when the beneficiaries themselves do not look beyond social welfare departments. They are seen all the time lingering around these institutions with the hope that they would dish out some scheme for the former. Whenever some schemes come they are delivered on the condition that the recipient furnish evidence in support of their claim. Endless waiting for the actualization of claims causes irreparable damage to the dignity of the former. This is done through the constitution of patron-client relationship. Very strange to modern democracy as people constitute themselves outside the state and stop asserting at against the state with the force of the language of rights. They have always treated themselves as falling outside or on the periphery of the state. This self-inflicted peripheralization seems to have been happening because the socially deprived sections have the 'subsidized satisfaction' derived from their relationship with the state. The patron-client relationship is constructed and the dalits ironically take part in this construction. This contempt for public institutions also suggests that it is the sociologically real (caste background) that assigns hierarchical meaning to the former thus dividing them as less valuable and more valuable. (Finance and Defence are treated as the most valuable ministries). This overlap between the hierarchical social structures and political institutions calls into question Nehruvian confidence in public institution as the harbinger of respect. In view of the institutions failing to maintain their own dignity, the Gandhian alternative of ethical refinement of individuals might look attractive. After all it is the individuals who assign meaning to institutions.

Indian democracy, which seems to have become episodically relevant to the weaker sections, in effect has guaranteed only episodically dignity to certain people. That is to say, democracy can offer only 'incidence' of dignity that follows from the democracy as an event which comes after every five years, promising only the transitory worth to the marginalized. These groups enjoy only the tactical importance and that too during the election period. Some of these groups are not even fortunate enough to enjoy even incidental form of dignity as they are given the feeling that their support is not required. Some of the parties driven by the monstrous confidence of majority can afford to

ignore dalits and minorities. Dalits and minorities do not matter for such parties. This used to happen during the Congress dominance. It has created space only for the people to enjoy worth and recognition only for strategical purposes (Some of the Shiv Sena leaders said that they did not require dalits votes. Similarly, the BJP candidate from *Godhra* assembly constituency said he did not want Muslim votes. In this unilateral and hence arrogant rejection, they loose their worth). The sense of majority turns these leaders into an arrogant snob who can choose to humiliate some people. On the other hand, democracy based on multiple minorities or socially segmented electoral situation forces people to respect the voters. One of the institutional ways to puncture this over-confidence is to convert the electorate into socially fragmented situation. This could be done through gerrymandering of the electoral boundaries, which ultimately would help restraining arrogant leaders from ignoring certain sections of the society. It will entail a sense of humility among the political leaders in particular and common voters in general. One of the ways to achieve a civilizing impact on some leaders is to stagger their demographic strength through gerrymandering. This would create uncertainties within the electorate which would force a person to refrain from humiliating the voters (one of the prominent Shiv Sena leaders chose to prostrate before the voters on every *dasera* day only to woo the voters). This could be considered as the regressive option as it comes up in the context of the failure of the force of argument that may not require demography as the precondition for the electoral success. However, if one were to take a subsidized view of India's successful democracy, one would feel certainly encouraged to see upper caste politicians going to dalit colonies thus crossing the purity-pollution line. This could be considered a remarkable gain of electoral democracy, especially in the context where dalits were supposed to announce their arrival in the public sphere.<sup>14</sup> Democracy has a civilizing impact on certain people.

However, in the recent years, when a growing number of people are being rendered invisible through casualization of labour, democracy is in search of its own citizens. In view of this invisibility of citizens it has become difficult to define the relationship between democracy and dignity. Dalits are facing second round of invisibility, the first being sociological based on purity-pollution, the second being political which suggests an internal exile of citizenship. One can define dignity in the context of a visible person carrying certain rights against the state. Citizens get related to the state only through certain rights that they have. For example, they can matter in the election only when they have the voting cards. During the last two decades, millions of migrant labourers have become invisible and have lost their claim on the state and democracy. These footloose labourers are always on the move and this very movement from one place to another rendered their cards useless. These people do not participate in any democratic processes. They feel the loss of dignity and self-esteem. Dignity can be defined only in terms of a visible person

or a group. The footloose labourers who are becoming regularly invisible are denied the very existence of their personality. They are cancelled out from the civilizational processes and institutions. This is a much deeper problem that any formal form of democracy can address. It is in this sense that Indian democracy is still in search of dignity.

### Notes and References

1. Victor J. Seidler, *Kant, Respect and Injustice*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986, p. 192.
2. Ibid. p. 191.
3. Upendra Baxi, "What is wrong with Sycophancy?" in Bhikhu Parekh and Upendra Baxi (eds.), *Political Discourse*, Delhi, Sage, 1997, p. 79.
4. *Writting and Speeches of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar*, Mumbai, Government of Maharashtra Publication, vol. 3, 1990, p. 182. Henceforth *WSABA*.
5. *WSABA*, vol. 1, 1989, p. 34.
6. Ibid.
7. This was the order that was issued by the State Government of Maharashtra for all the seven non-agricultural universities in the year 1999.
8. Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, Harvard, The Beknap Press, 1984, p. 56.
9. *Indian Express* (Bangalore), 14 January, 2006.
10. Brahmanghar Gram Panchayat was the all women's panchayat, in Bhore taluka of Pune District. The male members of the panchayat migrated to Mumbai and from there were alleged to have established their control on this panchayat.
11. Gopal Guru. *Party Politics in Parliamentary Reserved Constituency*. Unpublished thesis submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 1986.
12. Ibid.
13. This feeling was expressed by an IAS officer from Punjab.
14. Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1983, p. 13.

# DEMOCRACY AND “GOVERNANCE” IN THE WAKE OF MASS UPSURGE

Javeed Alam

Dissimilar kinds of mass upsurge have marked democracy in India since the mid-1980s. The popular upsurge among the Backward Castes that got built around the decisions of the V.P. Singh government to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission and the reaction to it, best epitomised with Advani's *Rath Yatra* for the construction of *Ram Mandir* on the site where *Babri Masjid* stood before demolition, has been the dialectics of Indian democracy since then. In this lecture I will be more concerned with the former. I will look at three important developments that have taken place because of that upsurge in the society and polity, each of which has had far reaching, though contradictory, repercussions for “governance”. The first of which has to do with the relations between, or rather how, the Centre and the regions, have been forced to deal with each other, by a change in the circumstances.

## I

Let me start with a commonly observable feature of the present-day politics in India. We are all witness to the development of a pattern in Indian politics since 1996, in which the government of the nation-state called India has been made up as much by the political forces and parties having their base in only one or the other of the various linguistic-cultural regions or “nationalities” that make up India. No all-India party or what in India are called “national parties” has been successful in providing a government to the country. Conventionally speaking, it is, on the European example, a coalitional pattern. But given the multiethnic or rather the multinational specificity of India, it is, on a deeper analysis, more than a coalition. It is much more a *co-governance* of the country by the nation and the regions that make up the nation. What constitutes the Centre at the level of the nation-state is made up a much of those who speak on behalf of and claim to represent the nation as those who do so for the various regions or nationalities. In fact this configuration has been a result of a long contestation, going back to the early years of Independence, between various forces as to how and by whom will the “nation” be represented and what will be the cultural identity marks of the nation (-state). The result is a slow process towards congealing of the respective claims of the diverse forces representing the nation-state and the different forces within the regions and the states. Given the present conjuncture, the nation and the regions cannot do without the other. I am calling it a co-governance in that sense. Now the sense of this will become clear if we compare it with an earlier period in the history of politics in India.

Dr. Alam is Professor at the Centre for European Studies, CIEFL, Hyderabad.

It is quite clear from the above that this period in the 1990s has been marked by a pronounced ascendance of regional parties in a somewhat enduring manner. In the short term (now, it is important to emphasise that there is no long-term trend that can be analytically discerned in Indian politics), there seems to be no chance of this trend being reversed. But what informs the ascendance of the regional parties is the absence of any overt conflicts or clashes between the Centre and the states in India however much of differences of opinion can be shown to exist on any number of issues. What seems to be happening between the Centre and the states in terms of differences of opinion are in the nature of symbiotic contests. This trend crystallized during the period of the two United Front ministries in 1996-98. Even the BJP with its chauvinistic nationalism, rabid communalism and centralizing zeal has been forced to accept the pattern and pay lip service to the code of behaviour entailed within these patterns, whatever be its efforts to push the hidden agenda on the sly. Barring a region here and there on the borders, the national unity of India seems to be acquiring deeper roots.

The earlier occasions when the region-based political parties representing the various linguistic-cultural regions of India emerged as a force were in the period 1967-72 (and the pattern repeats itself in the late 1970s as well, though on a relatively smaller scale). Let us only take those occasions for a contrast that is revealing in itself. The entire period was marked by intense (and shrill) struggle between the Centre and the states. There also were constant bickering and mutual accusations. The Central government charged the regional governments of being against the nation-state, in Indian phraseology, of being a threat to national unity. The state governments accused the Centre of becoming authoritarian—a danger both to democratic aspirations and the federal arrangement. Most of the parties ruling in the states—such as Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Punjab, West Bengal, Tripura, Kashmir and many others—went on to produce documents enumerating measures for the protection of the rights of the states and listing details of how the Centre has gone on encroaching into the sphere of their jurisdiction and had violated the rights of the state.<sup>1</sup> Each of these governments represented diverse ideological views, class preferences, social bases, and so on. It least bothered them as to how this greater power for the states for which they were fighting would be used by the different states, so long as they would have it for their own purposes. What brought them together against the government of the nation-state was, as I have called it in an earlier essay twenty odd years ago, an objective complementarity<sup>2</sup> in spite of different ideological and class preferences as between Tamil Nadu or West Bengal or Punjab and so on.

Today there is no sharp contradiction between the Centre (the nation-state) and the states (regional governments/movements) though there may be many differences of opinion or even conflicts of interests centered around economic and fiscal or monetary policies and on questions of culture and language

policies. In the earlier period, the dominant class forces in most of the states—the regionally based, non-big bourgeoisie both in industry and agriculture—also seized the opportunity to use the power of the state governments to better bargain with the Centre for resources and to get better deals for the regionally based dominant classes in the pan-Indian market. The national market with its price mechanisms and terms of trade was, and still is to a relatively lesser extent, controlled by the monopoly sections of the capitalist class; the control by the monopoly section lessened only to the extent of investment choices being determined as well by the imperialist finance capital. The manner of the operation of the pan-Indian market at that time made the entry of the non-big, regionally based bourgeoisie in the pan-Indian market that much more difficult, through the grant of licenses, input output prices, restrictive trade practices and so on. This, in fact, intensified the tussle between the Centre and the states.

As an aside, it needs to be mentioned that within this general pattern there was though an exception. The Left forces in general and in those states in which it was the dominant partner in the governments were also in the forefront of the struggle against centralization and the “authoritarian” tendencies of the Centre. But it sought the autonomy of the states to curb the power of the ruling classes and to use the autonomy for the state to further the interest of the working classes and the peasantry, pronouncedly in the case of West Bengal.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, this tendency operating across the ideological divide and class preferences of the various forces ruling in the different states created, what I have referred to above as, an objective complementarity.

Now no such contradictions seem to operate, at least, in a decisive way. Both the Centre and the states (the states hiking stakes vis-a-vis the other states) are competing to attract international finance capital, which itself is getting more and more centralized and, therefore, as for decisions about investment choices unified.<sup>4</sup> The appeal is to this capital for foreign direct investments (FDIs). All are votaries of Globalisation, barring the Left Front (led by the CPI-M) ruled states, though these too, given the policy imperatives of the Indian state and the class constraints imposed by the big bourgeoisie are keen to get as much foreign capital as possible; the difference being a greater emphasis on public investment and a sharper focus on other components of social democracy like democratisation of agrarian relations, local self-government and all round decentralization and so on. The important point in the espousal of globalisation by most state governments is: a larger share of national market as well as better access to investible resources is seen to be automatically insured by the availability of FDIs in industry and trade and services.

The upshot of the coming together of political and economic forces represented by the Centre and the states has been that the enormous diversity of India is getting mobilized in the shaping of a united India, rather than being a threat to unity as was earlier feared. This is an important stage in the



democratisation of national relations in India, something, for which the Left as well as the various regionally based democratic forces have been fighting. But the crucial point is that this has come about not as a result of any alteration in the constitutional scheme due to the pressure exerted by these forces but as a result of a politically emergent constraint on the power of the Centre; the unintended consequence of the compulsions of co-governance.

In rounding off this part of discussion the first major conclusion is the notable change in the functioning of Indian federation. There is a noticeable change in the direction and content of "governance". The polity is free of bickering and tensions. Federal relations seem to be, in relation to any other period of post-Independence history, in better order. There is greater protection, structurally induced, for pluralism and greater tolerance towards regional points of view as well as effective participation of the different states in the decision-making at the level of the Union. National unity is not a much-debated issue from this perspective (even it faces threats in other ways due to the communal fascism of *Sangh Parivar*). Federalism can function smoothly in India only if the diversity of the plural forms of social life is held in deep respect. Federalism in India is more than a technical matter of division of powers between the centre and the states; it has as much to do with the politics that informs them. It is tied up with the political unity of the nation. This is the lesson from the five disastrous years of NDA rule. It could do little with the division of powers but fiddled ruthlessly with the plural forms of social life generating tensions and conflicts between the Centre and many social groups in the states. Gujarat was only the most extreme, gruesome instance of this general trend.<sup>5</sup>

## II

The second change has to do with the powerful political currents unleashed by the Mandal politics, including the vandalism by the upper-caste youths with the connivance of powerful organised forces. These political currents are thoroughly changing the character of the political participation of the oppressed castes and have important implications for the politics of the present phase and consequently for the "governance" as well. Causally, this is due to the internal differentiation and class formation among these castes. The insertion of the causal connection between the differentiation and the nature of participation requires some careful elaboration.

Two things have been occurring simultaneously within these vulnerable communities. First, there was a long period of capitalist development, especially in agriculture, which was followed by land reforms, after Independence.<sup>6</sup> Many of the OBCs became propriety peasants. The long chain of dependence or and bondage with the landlords was snapped. Education, employment etc. among the OBCs slowly expanded. New modern classes were slowly emerging among them. Among the Dalits reservations as quotas in education and employment

and other meekly implemented affirmative action also led to similar results though on a smaller scale. What thwarted the collective development of Dalits was the nature of land reforms where land often did not go to the direct tiller. Most of the Dalits remained dispossessed of land, having been earlier non-occupancy tenants or agricultural labourers.<sup>7</sup>

As a consequence of all this, class and income differentiation has been taking place, however uneven, among these caste-communities and, therefore, a dispersal of earlier forms of power with their traditional leadership. Earlier such castes organised as *Jatis* were internally egalitarian because of the same occupation and skill endowment and, therefore, similar income levels. The breakdown of the inviolable links between the ritual status and occupation had far reaching consequences. It encouraged the movement of people, imperceptible though among the oppressed unlike with the *Savarnas* earlier, into different occupations and the acquisition of varied and dissimilar skills. With all these developments, the *jatis* started becoming internally inegalitarian; the process though has had a different tempo (depending on the possession of prior assets, skills, and status) across the distinct castes leading to the formation of modern classes within the caste communities. Differentiation and dispersion of inherited bases of power, if we go by the global pattern of consequences of capitalist development, also sets in process the dissolution of the "primordial" communities. Nothing of the sort has happened in India so far nor seems likely to in the near future even with the rapid *individuation* of interests and persons.<sup>8</sup>

Within the class formation hinted above, a middle class as well has been in the process of formation and consolidation within these caste-based communities. Estimates of various surveys indicate that today more than fifty per cent of the middle classes are coming from these oppressed communities; in the colonial period the figure is estimated to be hardly fifteen per cent. A further consequence of this has been the impetus given to a contrary process, or rather opposite to dissolution, of unification of these communities on wider scales. It is in the interest of these newly *emergent* middle classes, as distinct from the established ones who belonged overwhelmingly to *Savarna* castes, to unify these communities as blocs to compete for power in democratic contestations, especially the electoral competitiveness. We will refer to these emergent middle classes from among the oppressed as a *neo-middle class* to distinguish it from the earlier *established* one. These two contrary trends, differentiation and undermining of the inherited forms of constitution of castes and that of the process of internal unification, have had a simultaneous run over the last many decades.

To sum up: Differentiation and Unification form the two opposite poles in the dialectics of caste politics. Therefore, the contradiction inherent in the class formation within the communities and the individuation of interests around these manifesting in some sort of class conflict did not fructify. There

was thus a negation of the possibilities of the articulation of class tendencies as political positions. Instead what happened has been a consolidation of the caste groups on scales larger than ever before.

To digress here, this development has severely disadvantaged the Left in the entire Indo-Gangetic belt and led to its partial decline in this region, more particularly of Communist Party of India (CPI) in U.P. and Bihar where it had strong popular bases. It is not easy to evolve a strategy to combat or outflank this development among the oppressed castes. The Left to re-work its way into the political arena in this region, has precisely to work out such a strategy. What we instead have today, on the Left, is the politics of alliances to contain and defeat fascism. The Left has to continue to go on with the alliances because these are necessary in the present conjuncture but a strategy running parallel to the alliances has also to be in place as well; a challenge of a very difficult kind.

To come back to the main argument, a two-way contest has now come about in Indian society with deep repercussions for the democratic process. First, the neo-middle classes see in white-collar jobs and professional positions the main route to gaining status and prestige in society. Unlike the established middle classes from the *Savarnas* they have no status or other social assets to fall back on. So a breakthrough into these, monopolised by the established middle classes, is crucial for their self-esteem. Hence the clamour for quotas as a necessary aspect of "*social justice*". There is, secondly, a fierce contest on for a share in power. Self-representation, share in power corresponding to the numerical strength, allotment of ministerial berths, and so on are all a part of what is now talked of as "*empowerment*". These two terms sketch out the self-definition of the politics of the oppressed communities.

The struggle today is for recognition and bourgeois equality, without in any way implying a pejorative sense to *bourgeois*. In the hierarchy of the caste society where status degrading of the lower strata is built-in, the upper caste forces recognition from others without reciprocating, thereby denying equality and dignity to the other. In the situation that prevails in India the struggle for equality, therefore, becomes shrill and ruthless because recognition often has to be wrested from those who refuse to reciprocate. In a situation where egalitarian values prevail, people achieve recognition together; in other words, mutual recognition is recognition of the other as a human and, therefore, the moral and bodily integrity of the other is ensured.<sup>9</sup>

In tying up the discussion of this trend, here we can discern the second major change in the mode of "governance". *The system of representation has come into direct contradiction with efficiency and economy in the exercise of state power.* The widespread insistence on the part of the oppressed communities for *self-representation* has led to the decline in the quality of "governance". Given the historical inheritances which work to produce pronounced social disabilities among the lower castes, intrinsic merit, verbal

skills, social attainment, intellectual sophistication, and related qualities all are in deficit among the neo-middle classes who have emerged as the leaders of the oppressed castes. Rise in the din and decline in the decorum in the political debates have also followed this development. Is this something to despair about? I would only like to emphasise that a very important change, spread and expansion of democracy in India is taking place in a rather *untidy* manner in the Indian politics.<sup>10</sup>

[In parenthesis let us note in passing: talking of the strategy and limits of development in India, especially within the agrarian sphere, a question needs to be raised here. Imagine a situation of land going to the direct tillers as well, many of whom were agricultural labourers or insecure tenants, and belonging overwhelmingly to the *Dalits*. As the land reforms were conceived and implemented, most of the land got passed on to the occupancy tenants belonging mostly to the intermediate and backward castes. If it had also gone to other tillers including Dalits, what could have been the consequences? It is obvious that the articulation of interests, the constitution of communities and contestations between and within them, and the formation of classes within these castes and communities would all have been so different. The consolidation of the type that took place and the consequent ascendance of caste-based communities like Jats, Yadavs, Kurmis, Marathas, Thevars, Kapus, and so on is inconceivable without the way land reforms got carried out. This question cannot be pursued in any detail here. But it is important to raise it as counterfactual. It provides a link to the relations of production within the agrarian economy and its influence on the question of democracy in India—both its trajectory and inner dynamics. It is just for this reason that I want to add here that what has been said so far and what will be said henceforth about Indian democracy is based on this background understanding. There is nothing inexorable about the course of development of Indian democracy being analysed here. It has been conditioned, quite deeply, by the peculiarity of the surrounding bourgeois condition confronting the Indian agrarian society. Any pre-existing social formation has many possible ways of developing in terms of the transformational strategies adopted and the nature of development of the popular movements.]

To move off from the parenthesis, first, it hastened the process of this unification of these communities under leadership of the neo-middle classes within these communities. And if we read this together with the first trend described above, then the Yadavs or the Kurmis or the Dalits are now a caste in only a nominal sense because all the normative markers of what constitutes the *Varna* order are being eroded as well as rejected. They have become a *community* in any sense of the term. Communities can be identified when they articulate in a socio-political context. A fixed definition can be a source of misspecification. Community boundaries vary as per the context. For example, in face of the Hinduva onslaught the entire Muslim community in any specific

area would feel like a community. But in a situation of sectarian disputes, Muslims become *Shi'a* or *Sunni* communities. Or, to take another instance, during a village *Mela jatis* act like communities but in case of feud with another village the entire village stands up as a community.

What I want to emphasise is that in the transition to becoming communities, the individual *jatis* survive as identities with caste names but what made for the caste system was the *varna* ideology. What held this ideology together has been eroded, almost entirely. None among the lower castes anymore subscribe to the notions of purity and pollution (clean and unclean castes) or the ritual hierarchy—the two pillars of *varna* system. It does not matter even if the upper castes hold on to these conceptions, this being simply a case of self-attribution and not that of being held as superiors. The system works only when the subordinate *jatis* were to act according to these prescriptions. This is hardly the case anywhere in India. The individual castes are, therefore, akin to communities fighting for bourgeois equality.

In spite of all that is positive in politics of the oppressed communities, there is a great infirmity in this battle for bourgeois equality. Each community wants to preserve its own internal relations of power and it is here that they also take recourse to traditional ways of enforcing compliance. The worst result of all this is that the women are systematically excluded from the fight for equality. Women as restricted part of these communities are a segment of this process of egalitarian thrust vis-a-vis the women of the upper castes. But as persons within these communities they remain, or are in fact becoming more, unequal in relation to men. Women in the pre-colonial economy performed valuable labour and in terms of skills their work was comparable to that of men. All this is changing in an adverse way for them. With the development of the forces of production they have suffered a downward mobility. As their work has remained static in relation to the development of skills in society its value has been going down; in other words, it is becoming de-skilled in relation to the work done by men. This is perhaps more pronounced in the case of OBCs as compared to the Dalits. Nevertheless, their work in all the oppressed communities has become marginal and women's economic dependence on men has correspondingly increased.

What makes the matters worse for the oppressed are the moral codes, which define life within these communities. These moral codes militate against equality and gender dignity. This moral code is always *imposed* and never *advocated*. It is here in terms of the criteria of advocacy as against that of imposition that we get a criterial basis to make judgements between modern moral outlooks and traditional moral codes. Any one of the modern moral outlooks seek compliance in terms of advocating a certain way of doing things which in turn involve, many a time, a great deal of persuasion. Quite to the contrary, traditional moral codes are more often imposed with threat of retaliation as the basis for compliance. It is therefore always in terms of the

form and not necessarily in the content that the modern moral outlooks can claim certain superiority.

We must, therefore, be wary of defending identity as *difference* unconditionally on the ground of the rights of the communities to a way of life, as many are doing against the, allegedly, homogenising tendencies of modernity.<sup>11</sup> My question in relation to the concerns of a society seeking to establish a regime of rights as the basis of democracy will be: how much of difference is to be pushed or defended as unconditional, as the votaries of community rights do? My fear is, if too much of difference is to count for too much, then the power of the dominant in the community who uphold the difference becomes the arbiter in the life of the people. In the name of democracy we cannot also allow indignities and atrocities to go on because communities are so constituted; or alternatively wait indefinitely for an alternative to emerge from within the community. Given their codes, the dice is loaded against the weak within the vulnerable communities, more against some like the women than the others. While it is important to respect differences of culture and belief, this however must be on two conditions: that any practice which militates against the dignity of person must be forced to defend itself and that the state must be forced to protect the person even if it means coercion.

The crucial question, therefore, is: can a right to a way of life be claimed on behalf of a community when the exercise of the same is denied to the individual? Not unsurprisingly in our struggle for civil liberties we have not properly examined these issues; unsurprisingly because we have not specified which rights can be violated by the state and which rights are under constant threat from communities fighting to hold on to what they think they are. If the rights of the individuals are important as one aspect of the democratisation of society then it is important to distinguish the political-legal rights which can be invoked against the institutions of the State, and those background rights to restrain the powers in the communities from denying choices to the individuals within their fold. So under the circumstances as we are in today, we need a different framework of assumptions to build justifications of what is permissible within the claims of the community.

If a community's right to a way of life cannot be questioned on democratic grounds then this can perhaps be so on the basis that the community justify and defend what it enjoins on the individuals as obligatory. This seems to me to be necessary for the following reasons. A community, first of all, does not live a life of Robinson Crusoe. It lives amidst and surrounded by other communities in society. Its well-being is dependent on mutually beneficial material and symbolic exchanges with the others. At issue here is the question of maintaining one's difference from others in the society. The difference that it wants to maintain from others ought not therefore be repugnant to all others in the society or the basis of happy coexistence gets threatened

and, in times of the kind we are in where work and habitations are no more spatially separable as was the case with earlier communities, a potential for violence is created.

It is in order of things that we be careful in saying that it is mandatory to defend difference. Briefly, we ought here to make a distinction between difference in *principle* and differences in the *practice* of treatment. Let me give an illustration. A community may be seen to be justified in asserting that it does not approve of "adultery" but the same justification cannot be granted if it insists on publicly humiliating or brutalising those it holds to be guilty.

To round off the discussion, I want to argue that communities ought to allow the individuals the *right of exit*. In conditions that we are in today *exit* can have many meaning, each of which specific to the situation that vulnerable people find himself or herself in. Right to *exit* in one sense can mean a struggle within a community that is one of principled distance from the prevailing views and-practices of the community. The foremost historical instances of these to my mind are the figures of Socrates and Gandhi. From our contemporary scene, we can mention the names of Ashgar Ali Engineer or Swami Agnivesh. The principled distance can go to extremes and the communities may go to the extent of physically removing you. But then it leaves us with "exemplars" who then are a source of constant renewal of the urge to greater fairness in society. In a second sense, the exit, let us here consider the case of women, and the right to it can be internationalised, meaning thereby that given the universal structures of patriarchy (for all their variations) women movements not only have fraternal relations but build a common struggle cutting across the national frontiers. In a third sense, to consider the Dalits, the right to exit may be absolute; you can simply walk out in the way that one walks out of a filthy joint. The right to exit then from the angle of this argument is quite central in accommodating the claims of the community and the rights of the individual. And to insist that the State protects the individual making the exit is simultaneously to struggle to democratise the state.

So while we recognise the valuable nature of the shift in Indian politics which seemingly is based on castes we also have to engage in a sustained democratic struggle against the inegalitarian and hidebound outlooks inherent in the emergent communities in India, especially their gender blindness. This means that while we respect the identity of the oppressed communities, we also have to remain suspect of the cogealing of these identities. In other words, while we welcome the extension of democracy in India, we simultaneously have to struggle to deepen democracy on this expanding canvas. Deepening of democracy, apart from substantive content, requires two *formal* conditions in the Indian situation. One, Dalits and women have to become bearers of entrenched rights. And, two, these communities must be obliged to embody a condition of rationality; that is, critical scrutiny and reflection as preconditions for claims on the members, as happens in the case of self-created communities.

### III

The third change has to do with the contradictory responses of the people to their experience of democracy. There is a deepening of commitment to democracy among the ordinary people in India. They have a high sense of "efficacy" or usefulness of their vote. They turn out in much larger numbers compared to the established middle classes or the elite to exercise their vote. This sense of efficacy of vote goes together with their distrust of political leadership including the ones they elect as representatives, parties, the institutions of the state and the other paraphernalia of democratic functioning. The question then is: how did then this commitment to democracy come about?<sup>12</sup>

Governments in India have solved none of the problems of livelihood—work, food, shelter, health etc.—whether suffered singly or collectively by the people. The point that these problems are less severe or that fewer people statistically speaking are victims of these problems is a moot point. The point also is not that there has been very little development in building a modern economy in India. Even if it is less than what India was capable of, it is quite considerable looked at from the sheer increase in the size of science and technology, industry, trade, agriculture, infrastructure and so on. But what singularly marks the Indian experience with development even when we compare with it not with east and south-east Asia but even countries like Tanzania for instance, is the relative inability of the Indian pattern of development to solve the basic problems of poverty, health, literacy, livelihood, housing, etc. Economic and technological development in India, in other words, has failed to provide solutions to social problems. So obviously the growing acceptance of democracy is not because it has solved the problems of society. Even today half the illiterates of the world are found in India and the number children at the age of three is close half of the total. Thus the Indian experience with democracy seems to me to be somewhat unique. It goes contrary to what J.S. Mill theorised and which is taken as the epitome of democratic wisdom.<sup>13</sup> Where then do we look to for such a widespread acceptance of democracy as desirable?

The clue, I would like to suggest, lies in what has happened to the social structure with the working of democracy, in the context of the development of capitalist relations, in India. This has unhinged the rigidity of the mechanism through which social conformity of the most severe kind was conventionally enforced in India. All traditional societies enforce strict conformity; that is, codes both at the level of morals and conventions are not advocated but imposed. It means that force, rather than persuasion and reasoning, is the mode of enforcing compliance. This is important because advocacy implies persuasion whereas imposition is evidently coercive. But in India, in addition to this, much else is involved. With its caste system India has been quite a case by itself. There is a powerful, inbuilt mechanism in it to push people



towards a status ridden, hierarchic downgrading and through this process a systematic denial of respect and dignity to people in the lower orders of the caste system. Rather, humiliation is systematically used as a weapon to keep people from developing self-confidence to stand up and speak. Because of the scriptural sanctions that it enjoyed, it has been a self-validating system of authority and traditions associated with it. All this started breaking up, slowly in the beginning but gathering strength as time went by, with the industrialisation and urban growth, increasing penetration of capitalist ways of accumulation of surplus in the country-side, subsumption of labour and all else which goes with the development of capitalism. And this on-going process of capitalist development, since Independence, has all taken place within a framework of a more or less sustained working democracy. This has given a specific flavour to the making of modernity in India.

Modernity may, as it is alleged, enforce normalisation—everybody made to live by the same standards and norms—but it is not conformist in any sense. Modernity allows for a great deal of autonomy of persons. It does so, first, by giving rise to an objective, historical process of individuation—making persons bound up within communities into self-referring individuals and by putting a high premium on individual choices for life styles and self re-making. It permits me to become different from my surroundings and to live at a certain distance from the communities out of which I may have emerged. It undermines those conditions, which make life unfree. Democracy when it functions uninterruptedly in the context of such a change, facilitating and checking its excesses, has a loosening effect on the inherited social structures, which were always seen to be excessively oppressive, especially their hierarchical features, sustaining notions of high and low in terms of purity and pollution. This is what it seems to me to have been happening in India over the years of functioning of democracy. Rule of majority, whatever its limitations in India, recognises individual level equality of vote and rights which enable people to wage struggles even when other aspects of equality are regularly denied in practice.

Denials and affirmations are a complex amalgam here in Indian society. As a Dalit I may be denied access to the village well or an upper caste house or even at the barber's shop. As a woman I may not be allowed to regulate my time or work. Nevertheless, as a citizen my vote, whatever I am in social status, is not worth any less as compared to a Brahmin's or that of a patron. Similarly, my evidence as a witness in a judicial process does not count as any less in value. This disjunction between social existence and citizenship does, no doubt, lessen my functioning as a citizen but does not negate it. It in fact opens up a terrain for struggles and, however constrained my struggles, they are means of enhancing my capacity to function as a citizen and to narrow the gap between this and my social existence. With this when people become conscious of group numerical strength, there also comes to them a greater sense of ability to move things in their own favour, a little here and a little there.<sup>14</sup>

Democracy in India is therefore an assertion of the urge for more self-respect and a sense of dignity and to be better than what you were made to be. This is a clear manifestation of the secular power of society that is simultaneously the erosion of the self-validating nature of the power of the social structure. All this has conferred an added thrust to and taken forward the radical impulses generated through the powerful popular movements from the time of the Freedom Struggle, in spite of the ruling classes acting as a brake on the process. Let us look at this a little closely.

Indian society for ages unforeseen had given an effective voice only to a small stratum made up of what are called the *dwija* castes or the *Savarnas*. It may have, perhaps, been overtly less repressive than the other pre-modern class societies but its mechanisms of conformity were more ideologically based on the internalisation of direct scriptural sanctions than anywhere else. This stratum called the *Dwija* headed by the Brahmins took the voice of every one else away. The intention here is not to present a very unified picture of pre-modern Indian society. It is simply to draw a contrast, a stark one at that. I am quite aware that Brahminical hegemony was often challenged. This started with Buddhism and continued with Bhakti movements, Islamic Sufism, Sikhism, and similar less known trends among the oppressed. Yet the Brahminical hegemony never got disordered in any sustained way over widespread areas, as any Dalit or woman would vouch for. Alternatively the challenge to Brahminism was often beaten back as Buddhism in 10-12 centuries or contained as minor trends as happened with much of the Bhakti movements.

Democracy with all the struggles, agitation, mobilisations of all kinds, electoral participation and such other things broke the rigidity of the enforcement mechanisms of the social structure. The most lowly placed in the Indian society, the worst victims of this, could feel a little less suffocated; in a minimal way they could feel what it means to breathe the air of freedom, a sense as well of what all freedom could become. Here both an emphasis and a reiteration are required. The erosion of the inflexibility and hardness of enforcement mechanisms should not be confused with the modernisation of social institutions or the replacement of caste and other traditional institutions with modern ones.

Here we must also be careful and not overread the situation. What the ordinary people have gained, given the conditions of their social existence, is very little. It is important to realise what is the limit on this freedom. It is exercised in a very narrow space. And this space becomes available by the traditional power becoming *loosely regulated and sporadic in its nature*. The power of the traditional institutions has not broken down completely and therefore conditions, which constrain the people from exerting their powers to enhance the realm of choices, remain ever present. To put it in another way, it means that reprisals have become *ad hoc* in nature. Ordinary, poor people

can go on doing things in their own way, contrary to inherited norms. But then at points unforeseen they may be hit at with varying severity. So reprisals have not gone but have become random and are not systematic like earlier. But then again they now can register a FIR with police and, more importantly, organise more people of their kind to fight back. Nevertheless this, I presume, is the opening they really cherish, in face of deprivations and denials. People have forced their admission, limited though, into the world of social dealings. In defending the democratic system it seems to be this little gain that they cannot think of being deprived of.

From the point made above, an important implication follows. The conditions of social existence being what they are, the inequalities within the society having, without becoming any less severe, changed, seen in a relative sense, their terrain in an important sense. What stared people in the face and which took away their voice were the ritual-status inequalities. In their place have come to *fore* the economic inequalities and with this those of power in the secular sphere. Inequalities of income and power in the secular world, unlike those of the ritual world, do not restrain the assertion of civic and political rights. In fact they encourage these and help bring together, as is happening all over the world, egalitarian values as integral to the democratic principle, for struggle and debate. It is in the very essence of economic and other secular inequalities to elicit a counter trend of fighting against this. and it is this, which is the basis of all radical consciousness.

#### IV

Let me conclude this discussion with a conjecture, which seems to me to be the central point of developments in Indian democracy. *The democratic process, or the processes around democracy, has detached itself* from the institutional infirmities surrounding it, whether they be of the parties, representation, leadership, etc. and in the course of this the process has acquired an *autonomy* of its own. The deepening legitimacy for democratic polity inheres here, in the process—in the struggles including electoral battles and various others, organised and unorganised agitations. The process is the space, which becomes available, contracting now and expanding then for the range of resistance people are capable of. The invisible incremental advances and "concessions" won are registered here. This happens in spite of the shape that the organised field of politics has acquired. What I want to suggest in passing here is that a radical revision of the theories of legitimacy together with how it comes about and where it resides, as elaborated in academic studies in the West, is called for in relation to other experiences with democracy. With the growing commitments for democracy in India, it is doubtful if the norms of democracy have spread, nor can we be sure if the deference for procedures has grown. Functioning of democracy in India has also not provided for an opportunity for radical solutions to problems of social life. Yet, as we have seen, it has

given rise to a new kind of democratic progress, constrained no doubt by the hegemonic bourgeois condition and the remnants of the ritual world.

We thus have a third repercussion for democratic "governance", the disjuncture between the process of politics and the exercise of state power. These have become like horsepowers harnessed in opposite directions but with the balance always tilting in the direction of state power. Given this tilt, the conscience of the state is always in the deficit, giving rise to incongruence between the reason for political participation and governmental outcomes. The defeat of the BJP and the contradictions in the working of the UPA government are clear indications of this severance. This lends a peculiar vibrancy to democracy in India. A silent class backlash is always in the offing. The electoral verdict of the year 2004 clearly tells us this and suggests what democratic "governance" ought to be like.

### **An End-Word on Governance**

All the changes and developments we have talked about are taking place in the era of globalisation, the WTO-led liberalisation and structural adjustments. This period of the ascendancy of (centralised) international finance capital has targeted the State as an institution of social welfare. It is a period of the decline of State as a benign institution providing small relief to people to make life liveable. This has serious repercussions for people's well-being across the world. There are more poor people in the advanced capitalist countries today than ever before after the end of the Second World War and a far greater concentration of income and wealth with the capitalists. But the consequences are much worse for the people in the third world.

Ordinary people here, as a routine, live a life of unmet daily needs. They cannot pay for education and health and shelter and so on. The State under the dictates of global capital is withdrawing from these areas and privatising welfare, denying these basic necessities to people in dire need of these. The quality of life of the people in terms of nutrition and health has drastically declined over much of Asia and Africa in the last two decades.

Globalisation has also led to the de-ideologisation of politics as can be seen in the position of all parties on the questions of "reform", barring the Left. The main function of politics is no more to tend to people's needs but to facilitate the unfettered growth of capital, both domestic and global but in unregulated competition. How well the State does this is being referred to as *good governance*. I, therefore, started with and continued using governance in the quotes. My brief was to talk on democracy and governance. So I did not want to begin by picking a tiff with my hosts. Now at the end, when I am re-writing the talk, I want to reflect briefly on this.

Given that the main function of the government is facilitating the unfettered growth of capital, good governance is also dismantling of controls and tariff barriers, low taxes on the proprietors of capital and owners of wealth,

privatisation of government assets, and so on; all round de-regulation for unhindered capital flows across the national barriers. The form of State that informs this process is one which thinks like a corporation. It is, therefore, not surprising that Chandrababu Naidu, the chief protagonist of reform and the monitor-boy of the World Bank crowd, felt proud when he was referred to as CEO rather than as Chief Minister. The state under him became internally akin to a corporation. This was the pinnacle of good governance. India was chided to become like Andhra Pradesh under Chandrababu Naidu.

Governance as a descriptive term is quite old and harmless but as a new import from World Bank with its conceptual baggage, it is deeply value-loaded in favour of capital and market. "Corporate Governance", in vogue, is the model for democratic governments. We should, therefore, be aware of the implications of the way we use the word governance; its uncritical use makes the World Bank's assumptions to slide in.

It is interesting to note that the government of West Bengal with all its social commitments and democratic initiatives and devolution of powers to people has never been, as far as I am aware, looked upon as providing good governance. Kerala, with a lower per capita income than many states in India but having the highest index for the quality of life, has not had the honour of being called a good governed state. Nor have the governments of some of the Latin American States, where people have revolted against globalisation and forced an alternative agenda on the State been supposed to provide good governance. This is the case with many governments in Latin America and their number is happily growing. But Venezuela under Hugo Chavez is the prime example. The more it does for the basic needs of the people and to build the national economic well being the more it is criticised for irresponsible governance. The manner in which the word has been selectively used for certain types of States makes it deeply suspect, in its current usage.

### Notes and References

1. To mention a few of these, the DMK government appointed the Rajamannar Committee to look into this issue and the Tamil Nadu government published Report of the Centre-States Relations Inquiry Committee, (Madras, 1971); the Akali Dal government in Punjab adopted the Anandpur Sahib Resolution, (Amritsar, 1973); and the Left-Front government of West Bengal issued *A Memorandum on Centre State Relations*, (Calcutta, 1977). The Chief Ministers of the opposition-ruled states also held regular conclaves for pressuring the Central government for greater state autonomy. See also K.P. Bombwall, (ed.) *National Power and State Autonomy*, (New Delhi, 1977).
2. Javeed Alam, "Class, Political and National Dimensions of the State Autonomy Movements In India", *Social Scientist*, No. 111, August, 1982.
3. Kerala already had land reforms under the Communist Party-led government of EMS Namboodiripad during 1957-59. So the class struggle in Kerala during this period did not look so pronounced like in West Bengal.



4. On the nature and the mode of operation of global finance capital and implications including for theory, see from his many writings on this Prabhat Patnaik's "Introduction" to *Lenin—Imperialism: Highest Stage of Capitalism*, (New Delhi, 2000).
5. There is a historical coincidence here that makes for an interesting reading and comparison and a possible, though tenuous, connection with the past as antiquity. The reading has to do with, what I consider to be, the manner of the making of Indian plurality and its specificity. As we look at India today, below the nation-state, there are numerous linguistic cultural communities and these are the starting points of Indian diversity or plurality and this diversity, from here, moves down to innumerable smaller communities and groups.

One important legacy from history has been the fact that what are now the linguistic-cultural communities (evolving as distinct linguistic regions from the time of the Sangam period in the South and from the period of Bhakti movements in the rest of India) could never be kept together into a single State through conquest. This is of quite some consequence. It is quite unlike in the case of China where only a centralized state could create and hold the civilizational belt together. The relatively high degree of civilizational uniformity across the regions that we find and the varying degree of cultural unity within the different regions that India achieved before colonialism have not been the result of state-induced coercion as happened in China or forced incorporation as in the Czarist Russia which the post-revolutionary multinational Soviet state inherited. The civilizational uniformity came about imperceptibly and the regions were drawn in into patterns in affinity with this uniformity through a single framework of action based mainly on the *Varna* order—ideology and prescriptions or rituals and the slow dissemination of a set of philosophical pre-suppositions like, for example, notions like *karma*, *moksha* and so on (which are common to high tradition and local religious beliefs). These features, both the framework of social action as well as the philosophical pre-suppositions, had come to acquire a deep rooted social acceptance before the British came. The coming of Muslims and varying large scale presence in different parts of India only added a diversity into the cultural unity of the various linguistic-cultural regions; a diversity unlike other ones in the sense that it could not be assimilated into the Hindu world view and which later became problematic with the rise of the national movement.

Suffice it to note here that there neither was an enduring presence of a centralized State (as in China) nor an organized Church (as the Roman Church in Western Europe) to enforce centrally conceived compliance with a belief system and social or ritual norms, important in facilitating the creation of a civilizational belt. Hundreds of locally based, traditionally inherited modes of enforcing compliance do not induce a feeling of being forced by an outside, external power; local chieftains may surely have played a role but these cannot be considered as the key elements in the system of compliance which was the dominant, enduring form in India.

The State as centralized institution though not absent but was an episodic presence, with very long periods intervening without one such institution. This mode of creation of common or similar cultural complexes and the conceptions

and practices embedded in them is very much an Indian inheritance. This inheritance, in multiple reconfigurations and constructions, became an important ingredient in the making of modern India, India as a nation state.

All this came about through a peculiar pattern, and this is the second pre-colonial legacy, of Brahminical expansion, an important feature in the evolution of the principles of state-craft. In this mode of social formation and cultural incorporation, the Brahminical or high culture confronted proto-state or insulated sections of society which were in many ways very different from the Brahminic world-view, various forms and levels of, variations notwithstanding, tribal existence. The Brahminical culture entered into a process of give and take, accommodation, or, to use a more current term, made compromises. Leaving apart the essential features of the social structure the highly hierarchical caste system (with Brahminical supremacy at the one end and at the other end untouchability) and the core philosophical beliefs of *Sanatan Dharam*, everything else was allowed to remain as it was, or was left to itself. [Some of these interpretations are based on works like Romila Thapar, *From Lineage to State: Social Formation in the Mid-First Millenium in the Ganga Valley*, (Oxford Paperbacks, New Delhi, 1990); and *Ancient Indian Social History*, (Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1978), see the concluding Ch. for exceptions to this pattern; see also R.S. Sharma, *The State and Varna Formation in the Mid-Ganga Plains: An Ethnoarchaeological View*, (Manohar Paperbacks, Delhi, 1996). Although I have drawn on these authors, some of the interpretations are entirely mine and I do not intend to burden them with much of what am saying here]. This provided for an inherent, non-definable plurality of practice in the daily life of the people. This *insulated plurality* was to remain the basis of a great deal of autonomous cultural innovations in the different regions of India. Thus the pre-colonial hegemonic system—civilizational *uniformity across* the regions and cultural *unity within* the regions—in India was built around core definitions about the world by the literati but the daily routine activity was left to evolve on its own. So we have had the “unique” thing called India with a high degree of unification in the social formation as well as a bewildering variety of diversity.

Now what has all this to do with the argument in the text? My purpose here has been to draw attention to the deep-rooted and highly autonomous nature of Indian “diversity” in the Nehruvian idiom or what I have been calling plurality. The high degree of internal autonomy of the plurality of social forms of life, I presume to think, invites spontaneous resistance when fiddled by an external authority. And this, I again presume, provides a connection, even if tenuous, with the contemporary social reality. Attempts made to homogenise social life by a centralised external force, in the way BJP has been attempting to do, tend to meet with resistance. Nevertheless, it is always a pleasure in the way of knowledge to sometime give in to audacious speculations, if these enrich our imagination.

6. Talking of capitalist development in agriculture I do not want here to enter into the question about the “mode of production in agriculture” debate. I only want to point out that any mode of production can have reference to, methodologically speaking, the entire economy as such and not just to, I believe,

this or that sector of the economy. I take it that capitalism has been developing in agriculture in all parts of India, much more in some places than in others, whatever the empirical evidence of feudal practices and castes atrocities and gender violence. Anyway for those who are interested in the debate can see Utsa Patnaik, (ed.) *Agrarian Relations and Accumulation—the Mode of Production Debate*, (Sameksha Trust Publication, Bombay, 1993).

7. For a general and comprehensive review of land reforms, see P.C. Joshi, *Land Reforms in India*, (Allied, Delhi, 1975); for the strategic implication of various patterns of land reforms contemplated in India and with what political implication these were implemented in different regions of India, a very incisive analysis is in Bhowani Sen, *Evolution of Agrarian Relations in India*, (People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1962).
8. Javeed Alam, "Is Caste Appeal Casteism? Oppressed Castes in Politics", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 27 March, 1999; see also mine "Caste, Class and Social Consciousness: Reflections on Contemporary Indian Situation", in K. L. Sharma, *Caste and Class in India*, (Rawat, Jaipur & Delhi, 1994).
9. See Hegel's discussion of "Lordship and Bondage" in *Phenomenology of Spirit* for the importance of recognition in the making of the self.
10. For details of this process see my article cited in note 8.
11. While I will defend the right to be different as essential to a multiultural society, I will strongly oppose, in contradistinction to the position of Partha Chatterjee, ("Secularism and Toleration", *EPW*, 9 July 1994) that it is absolute in the sense that no one can be asked to defend or justify the difference. Also it does not seem likely that "internal representative institutions" will take care of the reforms of the (pre-modern) communities in the way they can with self-created (like a Trade Union or an Environmental or a Feminist group) communities. I cannot think of a more representative arrangement created through struggle than the SGPC among the Sikhs or an inherited one like the *Khaps* among the Jats. We all know how terribly intolerant these can be towards dissent and brutal to the individuals who deviate from what they put out as good and proper and, therefore as ordained by "God" or tradition.
12. For details on each of these like the sense of usefulness of vote, the greater proportion of the poor and oppressed among the voters, the distrust of the leaders, etc. see the chapters 1 & 2 of Javeed alam, *Who Wants Democracy?* (Tracts for the Times 15), (Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2004).
13. In *Representative Government*, (Everyman's Library, London, 1960), J.S. Mill is clear that 'universal teaching must precede universal enfranchisement', p.280. In the following page Mill elaborates how this can be easily ascertained. The ability to read, write, and calculate...'should in all cases accompany universal suffrage....', p.281. It is common sense among the western liberal theorists that democracy cannot go along with illiteracy and poverty. Indian experience asks for a different theorising about conditions of democracy.
14. For the importance of small things like these in the fight for equality and for dignifying capability, see A. K. Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*, (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1995).



# **VIOLATING RIGHTS OR RIGHTING VIOLATIONS? NOTES ON A CRITIQUE OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA**

**Samir Kumar Das**

This paper is not so much about human rights as much as it is about their violation. While rights in general and human rights in particular are always considered as an integral part of democratic governance, their incorporation into the letter discourse has been neither easy nor unproblematic. Violation of rights has never been so simple that it could be taken care of and attended to by way of manipulating the conventionally available tools and instruments of democratic governance like bringing about judicial reforms or vigorously conducting human rights sensitization programmes in various security agencies or even by radically overhauling our democratic institutions and procedures by way of switching over to a presidential form of government or any of their combination. This paper proposes to draw our attention to the particularly complex and problematic cases of violation that seem to question the efficacy of the conventional tools and instruments of democratic governance. While making a critique, it never allows itself to be dragged into the raging debate over the alternatives. However, it never seeks to belittle the importance of such a debate. Although significant from the point of view of democratic governance, the paper does not enter into it primarily for reasons of time and space.

Persistent violations of human rights all over the world have threatened to transform the concept of human rights into a symbol of mourning. The tragic fact today is that we no longer feel exasperated by the spiraling cases of violation. The news of violation only adds up to our sense of fatigue and exhaustion. Never before in human history did we look so resigned to our fate. It is in such a context, the question of organizing our response to such persistent cases of violation acquires particular prominence. Since there is no thumb rule, we need to be extremely nuanced and sensitive in our responses.

## **Human Rights as Rights of Human Beings**

About eight years back, in one of my few essays written in Bengali, I made a rather strong plea for opening up some sort of a dialogue with the fundamentalists in the society.<sup>1</sup> Rationalists, I observed, are no less fundamentalist than the fundamentalists themselves when they rule out the possibilities of such a dialogue. The knee-jerk refusal to enter into a dialogue betrays an even worse form of bigotry, intolerance and fanaticism on their part

---

Dr. Das is Professor in the Department of Political Science, University of Calcutta, Kolkata.

ironically in the name of so-called anti-fundamentalist rationalism. While the refusal of the fundamentalists is understandable, that of the rationalists is difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend. Our society, I wrote, is caught up as it were between two mutually complementary forms of fundamentalism—conventional as well as the rational. Interestingly, the essay was titled, 'Fundamentalism versus Fundamentalism'. It created a hue and cry the moment it was published. The editor reportedly was bombarded by rejoinders after rejoinders some of which I preferred to respond to. To my utter surprise, I noticed that many of the rejoinders that the Bengali journal had carried cut across established frontiers of social and political thought such as liberalism, Marxism, post-Marxism and, of course, the now fashionable post-modernism. One of the most hard-hitting rejoinders, for example, rejected the idea of dialogue in the following terms:

...it is impossible to have a dialogue between fundamentalism and anti-fundamentalist rationalism...The difference between fundamentalism and anti-fundamentalist rationalism is one of kind. It is impossible on the part of a rationalist to accept the blind faith of the fundamentalist and the fundamentalist will never acquiesce to the reason of the rationalist. So, dialogue is impossible. And for an antifundamentalist rationalist, the question is not (the one of) dialogue with fundamentalism, it is one of opposition to fundamentalism (trans. mine).<sup>2</sup>

I did not for once rule out the importance of such opposition in course of a dialogue. But a dialogue can be meaningful if it opposes fundamentalism of both varieties - conventional as well as rationalist and gives the rationalist a chance to be self-critical, to shed the last traces of his own fundamentalism that more often than not seem to overpower him. What other forms of opposition - other than the dialogue was the author talking about? Isn't any opposition carried out through non-dialogical means an invitation to violence? Violence becomes justifiable if an opposition to fundamentalism inspires it. The rejoinder ends with a quotation from Paul A. Baran. Significantly the following sentence of this otherwise long quotation has been kept under author's emphasis: "... a meaningful discussion of human affairs can only be conducted with humans, one wastes time talking to beasts about matters related to people". In short, violence against fundamentalists is justified through a 'humanist' ethic that keeps them outside it. Since the fundamentalists do not qualify as humans and do not understand the language that the latter speak, violence is the only means that the humans are left with in order to deal with them. The right to dialogue is denied to the fundamentalists on the ground that they do not qualify as humans. We have reserved this right for ourselves. Our self-identity as rationalists also privilege us as human beings. As we free ourselves from the obligation of being bound by the rules and protocols of a dialogue, our violence against them, however ghastly and macabre it may be,

does not amount to violation of human rights, for they are not humans in the first place to be eligible for these rights. It is this unacknowledged ethic of violence that to my mind lies at the centre of our present tragedy. The tragedy is not that human rights are violated but that we remain so undisturbed by it. For we do not consider them to be cognizable cases of violation. Cruelty to animals is not the same as violation of human rights and does not warrant the same kind of response.

Fundamentalists in many ways complement the rationalists' refusal to enter into any form of dialogue. We know that the term 'fundamentalism' acquired a new lease of life with the 'Islamic Revolution' of Iran in the late-1970s. Ali Shari'ati, widely regarded as the principal ideologue of this Revolution, wrote a highly philosophical tract entitled 'Marxism and Other Western Fallacies' in which he has shown how the so-called Western schools of thought including rationalism have been unable to take what he calls 'true humanism' into account. As he concludes: "True humanism is a collection of the divine values in man that constitute his morals and religious cultural heritage. Modern ideologies, in denying religion, are unable to account for these values."<sup>3</sup> The concern for humanism is one of the most persistent concerns of this sharply written philosophical tract. In the same writing, he contrasts religion with modern ideologies, particularly Marxism and shows how 'the two ways diverge'. Indeed, the two ways diverge so unbridgeably that it is impossible to establish any dialogue between them. Ayatollah Khomeini, the high priest of revolution, according to Andrew Kimmens, was particularly averse to the idea of conducting any form of discussion and dialogue with the adversaries. As the possibility of any dialogue is ruled out, non-dialogical forms are bound to acquire certain currency. Violence begins when dialogue ends. Violence is the absence of dialogue. The Iranian Revolution and its aftermath not surprisingly witnessed a frighteningly prolonged saga of violence.

In simple terms, Human Rights world is no longer a single and uniform world. Today aggressors and victims not only inhabit two different worlds but also gleefully swap their positions without any visible sign of guilt. The two worlds are absolutely alien and incommunicable to each other. Their conventions and protocols are markedly different. For each, the world ends with them. The outside world is composed not of human beings but of 'beasts' who do not understand their language. Gone are the days when even the aggressor is driven by a sense of guilt. The sense of guilt can occur only when she recognizes the victim as a human being. Hence, what is construed as violation by a victim is seldom recognized as one by the aggressor and the victim has no compunction whatsoever when she seeks to avenge the wrong done to her by violating what the other takes to be her inalienable human right. She seeks to right the wrong done to her by others by doing the same wrong to them. In either case the wrong being done is done without arousing any sense of wrong-doing in the minds of those who actually commit it.

### **Human Rights as the Victim's Narrative**

This is one of the reasons why violence that accompanies the violation of human rights is of particularly brutal and savage nature. The examples of cutting one's body into pieces and throwing them around after one is strangled to death are by no means rare. At one level, they point to the absolutely macabre and senseless nature of violence, for torturing the body even after the victim has breathed her last does not apparently make any sense. There are many rather decent ways of killing people than slowly choking and bleeding them to death. The pain inflicted on the victim's body seems to be proportional to the pleasure that the aggressor derives from such otherwise ghoulish and inexplicable crimes. Much of the torture perpetrated against the Jews inside the concentration camps was, according to Hannah Arendt, meant for the 'amusement' of the Nazis. In all such examples, killing gives one the sense of fulfilment of a mission - not at all a sense of guilt, and the aggressor sees to it that in each of these the tell-tale signs of torture bear her signature. It is like invading the victim's body and stamping it with the seal of her invasion. At another level, such commonplace examples of extraordinary brutality and savagery to my mind point to the limits of violence and violation. Doesn't torture beyond death that I have elsewhere described as surplus torture, reflect a sense of frustration on the perpetrator's part? It shows that by way of breathing her last, the victim deprives her of the pleasure of mangling and torturing a living body. There is no violation that is of absolute nature. Thus Draupadi, the spirited adivasi woman of Mahasweta Devi's famous short story with the same title, does not feel intimidated at the thought of being taken to the darogah (the police officer-in-charge) even after a night-long saga of barbarity and serial rape in custody and barks: "What more can you do?" The word 'more' in this otherwise resignation-sounding statement in fact sets forth the limits of state repression.

Since no violence is of absolute nature, every instance of human rights violation is necessarily accompanied by protest. It is never the supine acceptance on the victim's part of what the aggressor does to her. That the protest is silent does not mean that it remains unregistered. Even silence has a language. Decoding the language of silence is by no means easy. To be sure, silence is not acquiescence. When violence is absolute, the victim is reduced to abjection. She is deprived of the cognitive means of articulating her pain. How can she communicate her abjection? As Jean-Francois Lyotard observes, "Abjection is not merely when we are missing from speech, but when we lack language to express."<sup>4</sup>

The greatest challenge of human rights discourse in the present-day world is to read the language of silence in the process of freeing it from what I call the victim's narrative. Even the most militant of human rights activists projects the victim as a meek and hapless being whom destiny has rendered powerless—indeed too powerless to assert her right to be recognized as human beings.

The victim is one whom destiny always situates at the wrong end of the spectrum. Violation of human rights, according to them, entails a violation of their rights as human beings. Human rights discourse thus is centered on a binary opposition between the powerful aggressor and the powerless victim. It is a war in which the victim is always fated to lose. The problem with this kind of understanding is that it founds the human rights discourse on the aggressor's compassion. It is like asking the powerful to be a little more sensitive to the powerless. Invocation of compassion is meant to neutralize the evil effects of power. Implicit in the appeal to the wisdom and good sense of the aggressor, there is the recognition, this time on the victim's part, of her as a human being. It is always the human beings who are supposedly endowed with the faculty of understanding the language of compassion. Aggression on the part of an aggressor is usually dismissed as only an event, which underlines her extremely momentary inability to become her true moral self. As soon as she returns to her senses from the fit of momentary madness, she realizes the mistake. Human rights abuse is thus described as a mistake that can be rectified. The discourse in this formulation turns into a giver's discourse. It depends on an act of charity done by the God's chosen few to those who are in desperate need of it.

Victim's narrative does not of course sensitize us to what I see as continuing struggles for human rights. More often than not, these are solitary struggles put up by apparently brave, albeit foolhardy, individuals with no social support behind them. But struggles do not lose their intensity because they are solitary. The violence that is unleashed against the victim also results in a certain individuation of her self by way of isolating her from the fellow victims. She feels lonely in a world in which she cannot even freely share her experience with others. It does not mean that she is the only one who has to suffer the pain. It only means that she finds it impossible to share her pain with others. Violation of human rights not only makes her subject to violence but also deprives her of articulating her pain in a language intelligible to others. She is thrown into a world of silence in which she feels that she is the only one whom destiny has chosen her to suffer the pain for whatever reasons. Victimhood goes hand in hand with silence. Viewed in that sense, violence involving violation of human rights prevents the victims from constituting any solidarity with others. Victim's narrative is always fragmented, individualized and private for she cannot share it with others. The example of sexual abuse of women as a form of human rights violation naturally comes to our mind. Unlike a male victim she suffers the double jeopardy of being a victim and facing the life-long obligation of hiding her victimhood from the peering eyes of the public. The violence she suffers imposes on her the special obligation of suffering it silently, that is to say, without letting others know of her agony and raising any hue and cry for we live in a society where such victims are accused of making their bodies available to their aggressors. Why do they not

kill themselves before being touched by their aggressors? Let me reproduce here a part of Jeet Behn's narrative that in a sense valorizes such efforts. The narrative revolves around the experience of a mob attack on a Sikh family in pre-Partition Western Punjab, now in Pakistan:

Suddenly, a section of our room's kuccha roof caved in. Someone was trying to break in. Someone else fired a shot in the air. Father handed each of us kirpans explaining carefully that if the mob broke the door we should stab ourselves on the left side. My mother, nursing my three-month-old brother, threw herself at the father's feet saying, "Save this child. Agree to convert." Father ignored her. When she repeated her entreaty my elder uncle slashed her neck with a kirpan yelling "Yeh kehna haram hai." (This is blasphemy). She dies instantly. Father put her blood stained dupatta on the tip of the sword, rushed out the door half-crazed. People waiting either side literally skewered him with knives and swords. My eldest uncle who rushed out after him was similarly cut down. The doctor cousin got up to fight next. His wife stopped him, demanding he kill her, all he girls, before he went out. He stabbed her, killed his three-year old son, stabbed each one of us, I still carry that kirpan scar on my scalp; and rushed out as we collapsed around him. He refused to stab his mother saying "No dharma tells me to do this." He was lynched in seconds. Last to go out was my octogenarian daadi. She tottered out, frail but resolute, saying: "Kaisi ladai ladne aaye ho? Mujhe apne bacchon ko ekbar dekhna hai? (What kind of war is this? Let me at least see my children once). They ripped out earrings, bangles, gold chain. And as she stood there bleeding, stoned her to death. Before they went they slaughtered the Muslim bhai (who gave shelter to the family).<sup>5</sup>

We know that victims and aggressors have no religion, for they cut across all religious communities. But, ironically, any attempt on a woman's part to make her unavailable to the aggressor does not save her from violence. It rather subjects her to a new form of violence—that of her own family and community. Had the girls rushed out, they would have met the same fate. Death any way—whether in the hands of outsiders or in the hands of their family members or in their own hands.

The reason why I have extensively quoted this passage is simple. It raises some of the most irksome questions to which we do not have any easy answer: Does this rapid succession of suicides and homicides establish the victims as human beings? Do they exercise their human rights by taking their own lives or the lives of their dearer ones? Do these suicides or homicides committed with the manifest objective of preempting violation of their bodies establish them as human beings? Is death then the ultimate price of human rights? While

answering these questions one should not lose sight of the fact that for a hapless woman the problem is double-edged. If she does not take her life, or get it taken by others, she makes herself available to her aggressor, in which case she stands definitely to lose her right as a human being. If she takes her life or makes others take it she succeeds in making herself unavailable to the aggressor but pays a huge price. The dilemma emanates from two rather divergent conceptions about what constitutes human rights and as a corollary to it, their violation. On the one hand, her own physical survival may be considered to be superior to her being subjected to sexual abuse. Left to herself, she might have been more interested in her own physical survival rather than establishing her identity as human being in the moral sense of the term. On the other hand, her identity as a human being may be considered to be much broader than her sheer physical survival. According to this formulation, death with dignity is preferable to life with indignity. If she prefers to define her as a human being in the first sense (which under all normal circumstances is likely to be the case), her family and community do not let her live in the way she wishes. The obligation of living with dignity makes her not only to define her as a human being in the way her family and community want her to but pay the ultimate price in order to fulfil it. Human rights viewed in this sense also confer on her the painful obligation of becoming human being in the way her family and community define it. She is always called upon to live up to what her family and community expect of her, notwithstanding the fact that she has often to pay dearly for it. We are not as much free to define our identities as human beings as the theorists of human rights would have us believe.

A regime of human rights imposes on us the obligation of becoming human beings in the first place. Sometimes, as in the example cited above, the obligation takes a toll on our lives. It is only when her right to exist physically is put at stake that she realizes that she enjoys the right to live with dignity. She is not there however to tell her narrative. Unless we make sense of this silence, how do we understand her right as a human being? The violation of her human right to exist physically is a precondition of this realization. Silence in short establishes her subjectivity. I shall argue that it is through the instrumentality of violation and silence that the victims elevate themselves into human beings. Human rights in this sense are not a given datum; it gets articulated through everyday violation. It is not the existence of rights that makes us aware of their violation, it is the violation that makes us aware of their existence.

### **The State as the Violator par excellence**

The regime of human rights is premised on the antinomy between the state and human rights. Generally, the protagonists of human rights, not always unduly, look upon the state as their enemy number one. A good deal of human

rights violation not, without reason, is attributed to the modern state. Similarly, the captains of the state have not always been in good terms with the protagonists of human rights. What is interesting to note in this connection is that the modern state has never denied the legitimacy of human rights. The point is that its responses to the cases of violation have not always been free from ambiguities. At one level, the protagonists of human rights are often charged with blowing these cases out of proportion and thereby falsely implicating the state. The state does not mind being put under strict rules of human rights auditing—an indispensable condition of democratic governance; its only regret is that the false charges aided by a generally anti-state media bring a bad name to it. At another, the state often harbours what I call the rhetoric of security in a bid to justify at least some cases of violation. Every state constructs a charmed notional security circle within which reside those whom it recognizes as the rights-bearing citizens. It is important for the state to ensure their rights, safety and security. Outside the circle are situated those who, according to the state, pose a threat to the country's security. The colonial state in India in fact blacklisted a number of communities as 'criminal' and they were quarantined from the general public for they understandably threatened the security of those within the circle. Some of the very early documents of post-colonial state in India talk about a number of un-or under-'assimilated' tribals of northeastern India who need to be turned inward towards the country's centre. The rhetoric of security plays the crucial role of determining the human beings whose human rights are in need of being preserved and also those who are not entitled to human rights for they are not human beings in the first place. The rhetoric of security divides the entire populace literally into two unequal blocs - one whose security as human beings counts in the state's calculations and another whose presence cannot but jeopardize the human rights of the former. In its campaign against the latter the state sometimes, though not always, commits some excesses and most importantly, the residents of the security circle are adversely affected in the process. The state of late has come up with the concept of 'necessary cost' according to which the abrogation and violation of human rights that the counter-insurgency operations may sometimes involve are only necessary to combat 'terrorist' threats to security and ensure the rights of the human beings. Dehumanizing the other, that is to say, treating others as 'less-than-human-beings' is the common feature that the captains of the state share with the fundamentalists and the rationalists. This once again frees the state of the abiding obligation of providing human rights to those who supposedly pose a threat to the country's security. Since they do not qualify as human beings, the state has no business of providing for their human rights. Let me take an example here. As I do not want to make this paper unnecessarily polemical, I shall refrain from directly mentioning the title of the book that comes to my mind. This multi-volume Bengali autobiography was written by an



administrator who has rightly or wrongly become a household name in Bengali society for his tough handling of the radical students' movement of the late-1960s and the early-1970s. Written in an embarrassingly self-congratulatory style, it seems to draw our attention to the bizarre and maniacal nature of violence that the student leaders, a euphemism for hooligans and criminals, unleashed against their enemies. The senseless and maniacal nature of violence suggests that it was the handiwork of those who were suffering from incurable psychotic disorders. Killings were only part of their attempt at quenching their thirst for blood. It is perfectly possible that one or two amongst them were suffering from mental ailments; but it is hard to believe that it was organized by an entire generation of mental patients.

The protagonists of human rights in their over-zeal sometimes liken the state to a handful of politicians and administrators, who in turn are held personally responsible for the violation that takes place in the society. For one thing, such a view, born albeit out of frustration, has a tendency of taking violation personally, as the result of their misdeeds. There are examples of intense rage being directed against them. Often they have been targets of attack and even fell to assassins' bullets. As they are identified and singled out, they often cannot take human rights criticisms in their stride. After all, deep in their hearts they also owe accountability to the society. It produces some very weird reactions on their part. The examples of some otherwise very competent and celebrity police officers committing suicides after they have been charged of violating human rights particularly in the wake of Khalistan movement in Punjab are by no means rare. The burden of human rights certainly hangs heavy in their minds. If human rights criticisms have made them morbid, they sometimes make others even tougher than what they actually were. This only tempts them to indulge in ever-greater violation of human rights. The importance of human rights education in the ranks of administration can never be denied.

For another, personalizing the enemy fails in seeing that modern state has an existence of its own, that at any given point of time it is greater than the sum-total of the sentiments and predilections of those who run it. Thus very much like their adversaries, protagonists of human rights commit the same error of bringing the matters to a sorry pass by way of personalizing the enemies. Modern states, unlike most of their pre-modern counterparts, are not governed by men, they are governed by norms and rules. It is important for the modern state to live up to the norms and standards that it chooses to set for itself. Excepting some rabidly totalitarian states in contemporary world, all states by and large make often lip-some commitment to the norms and principles of democracy. The greater the threat to democracy, the louder becomes the commitment, as the psychoanalysts would have us believe. To my mind, this has given us a space to work for making the state honour its commitment and observe the norms and principles that it has set for itself. We must make the

state realize that while honouring the commitment to human rights, a state does not have to cease to be a state. The antinomy between the state and human rights that once pervaded the human rights universe has lost much of its relevance. The policy of isolating the state and keeping it outside the human rights community does not always pay. It is also interesting to note that the state also realizes the importance of the human rights community in the society. The signs of such realization become apparent when the managers and administrators of the state feel the importance of 'politically' resolving the outstanding problems. Deployment and pressing in of ever-greater number of security forces, according to them, not only fail to deliver the expected results but complicate the problems. The state also knows that left to itself it cannot provide for everything in the society. Criticisms notwithstanding, institution of National and State Human Rights Commissions in India to my mind exemplifies the fact that the state cannot any longer remain indifferent to the question of human rights. The self-auditing that this mechanism provides for may have its pitfalls. It may have helped the state in securing undue legitimacy at a time when its human rights performance is coming under increasing fire. But it shows that the state cannot simply wish away the question like what it did in the yesteryears. The optimism about the state, to say the least, has to be cautious, but optimism nevertheless. It should not be interpreted to mean that we give the state a clean chit. It only means that we make the state deliver what it has promised and keeps promising to deliver our rights as human beings. However not all states are equally prepared for this realization. We may need some more rounds of dialogues before we succeed in making the human rights community and the state work in tandem. The state in order to become a part of the greater human rights community has to be bound by the same norms and principles that the community has set for it. The state's enrolment into this community does not mean its privileging.

### **The Friends and Foes of Human Rights**

If the state is universally regarded as the foe, people like us who fortunately are not the direct victims but find in them an interesting moral cause to cherish and pursue compliment ourselves as the friends of human rights. While the human rights community all over the world has held the state responsible for the violation of human rights and often ruled out the possibilities of dialogue with it, violation of human rights in the hands of the so-called friends takes on much more subtle and invisible forms. We live in a world where human rights per se do not seem to hold any importance. They become important if and only if taking up the cause of human rights serves our purpose. Thus the human rights agenda today is in danger of being subordinated to and hijacked by the narrow and petty interests of the so-called friends. I consider it to be another violation for it goes against what human rights are supposed to consist in—out rights as human beings.

The above point requires little bit of an explanation. We know that the notion of human rights stands on the seventeenth century 'natural law' doctrine according to which human beings are looked upon as human beings. By virtue of being human beings they are entitled to certain rights that are considered to be absolutely essential for their survival as human beings. Being a human being is so natural and self-evident that these theorists did not feel the necessity of providing any justification in support of human rights. Human rights are human rights because they do not require any kind of justification from those who enjoy it. The natural and self-evident nature of human rights posits human beings as ends-in-themselves. They are the irreducible and inalienable units. Human rights are inviolable because human beings are irreducible and inalienable. But when human rights are subordinated to any country's foreign policy objectives or, for that matter, to the narrow electoral gains of a political party, the 'natural law' principle is violated. The agenda of human rights is thereby reduced to an instrument as much as the victims whose cause is enthusiastically taken up by the so-called friends turn into the means to political ends. Nothing is more heinous than politicking over human rights. It is true that at times it may be tactically necessary to build coalitions with these so-called friends for they give us the opportunity of working with a common programme and forge a solidarity cutting across narrow political lines. But the greatest challenge of the human rights community perhaps is to figure out how we can scuttle the persistent attempts at hijacking the human rights agenda by our so-called friends. It is important for the human rights community to be critical of itself.

### Reference:

- [This paper is a vastly revised version of the lecture I delivered at the Peace and Justice Forum, Kolkata on February, 15, 2002. SKD]
1. See, 'Moulabad Banam Moulabad' (in Bengali) [Fundamentalism versus Fundamentalism] in *Parichaya*, August-October, 1993.
  2. Amitabha Chandra, 'Moulabad Banam Yuktibad' (in Bengali) [Fundamentalism versus Rationalism] in *Parichaya*, November-December, 1993.
  3. Ali Shari'at, *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique*, trans. by R. Campbell (Areekode, Kerala: Islamic Foundation Press, 1980), p. 91]
  4. Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'The Other's Rights' in Stephen Shute & Susan Hurley (eds.), *On Human Rights*, the Oxford Amnesty Lectures 1993 (New York: Basic books, 1993), p. 144.
  5. *Outlook*, May 27, 1997, p. 51.
  6. Samir Kr. Das, 'Concept Paper on Civil Society Dialogue in the Northeast' in Samir Kr. Das & Paula Banerjee (eds.), *Civil Society Dialogue on Human Rights and Peace in the Northeast* (Kolkata: Calcutta Reserach Group, 2001), pp. 3-9.

# **'e' Anyway?: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE e-GOVERNANCE ROADMAP IN ANDHRA PRADESH**

**Dipankar Sinha**

## **Introduction**

Since the dawn of the new millennium the generic concept of *governance* itself, and its more specific derivatives like *good governance*, *democratic governance* and *e-governance*, have become buzzwords in the media as well as in the precincts of policymaking, policy implementation and policy analysis. Thanks to the transnational organizations like the World Bank, the UNDP and the UNCTAD these buzzwords have gradually come to dominate the evaluative accounts of democracy in countries around the world. India, including its federated states, could not be an exception in this regard. However, these buzzwords are controversial, more by virtue of their association with these transnational organizations which seek to define and allegedly dictate the rules of governance. In this paper we, however, have a specific focus on e-governance. In being more inclined to explore democratic governance from the vantage point of e-governance<sup>1</sup> the submission that we are going to make is that like all buzzwords when it comes to e-governance there is a dearth of efforts to address its specificities. Nowhere perhaps it is more true than in the practice of e-governance being made synonymous with e-government. The main premise of the paper is that the initiatives on e-governance, in order to be effective and inclusive, need to have not just a citizen-centric focus but also a *citizen-driven* thrust by ensuring popular access, intervention, participation vis-a-vis the decision-making process on issues having impact on their life.

In the subsequent discussion, we make a distinction between e-government and e-governance, and reveal how a confused and blurred vision relating to their distinction comes in the way of democratic governance. In the process of exploration of the 'design defect' or 'design deficiency' in the e-governance roadmap we go deeper than any superficial explanation and identify the *localization*<sup>2</sup> factor—in the form of ground-level initiatives in democratic decision-making and the associated task of demand-driven, value-added, location-specific deployment of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT)<sup>3</sup>—as the 'missing link'. However, at this juncture we need to make an important clarification: while for the purpose of the paper we would illustrate the point in the specific case of Andhra Pradesh (AP) it should be noted that there are cases of design-deficiency in the roadmaps of other Indian states<sup>4</sup> and in those of the developing countries<sup>5</sup> as well.

---

Dr. Sinha is Professor in the Department of Political Science, University of Calcutta, Kolkata.

## I

### **Distinguishing e-Governance from e-Government**

An essential understanding of the distinction between e-governance and e-government, for obvious reasons, hinges on the notion and practice of democratic governance. Governance in general and democratic governance in particular have been at the centrestage of a prolific output of literature in recent times but a detailed survey of such literature is beyond the purview of the paper. But for the convenience of analysis we can, from the existing literature, briefly chart out some broad features of democratic governance. Apart from the cardinal feature of the right of the people to choose their representatives there are other prerequisites as well, such as, ensuring representation of all segments of people, enhancing the capacity of public institutions, capacity-building of citizens, providing key role to civil society in the process of governance and establishing widest possible access to the service delivery system.

Let us at this point mention that the spectacular ascendance of the ICT has made it a sort of essential instrument of democratic governance. It is precisely for this reason that both e-government and e-governance have come to enjoy much prominence in the parlance of policymaking as well as in the arena of theory-building vis-a-vis democratic governance. However, the fact remains that both the concepts are somewhat fluid in nature and being so they are subject to various, even conflicting, interpretations. Let us also assert here that even if e-government is a precondition to and an inalienable part of e-governance the two are not synonymous. The distinction between the two does exist, however slippery it might seem to be. The distinction, so to say, is created mainly in terms of their spread and depth, at the core of which lies the qualitative difference in popular participation—its visualization and implementation. Both e-governance and e-government rest on the enablement and utilisation of the ICT as a major means to achieve their objectives<sup>6</sup>. Yet there is an underlying distinction. E-government is generally defined in terms of the use of the ICT for online automation of workflow, repetitive tasks and upgradation of service delivery, with the primary purpose of making the government more efficiency-driven, productivity-driven and cost-effective. E-governance, on the other hand, has much broader parameters and implications of/for governance. Having an intensive normative dimension with the democratic exercise of power as its motive-force e-governance rests on accountability, openness, transparency and awareness and participation of the ordinary people. *Inclusiveness*, to be elaborated in the subsequent discussion, is a hallmark of e-governance. The main thrust of e-governance is on the *citizen-driven* decision-making process, which goes beyond the hitherto celebrated citizen-centric decision-making. This distinction lies at the root of

the differentiation of e-governance and e-government. In more concrete terms, while e-government has greater organizational-managerial thrust with basic *service*-orientation, e-governance is supposed to have greater systemicstructural thrust with greater *political*-orientation. To explain, from the vantage-point of the citizens,<sup>7</sup> e-government basically aims to provide citizen-centric orientation to government departments through efficient service-delivery by using the digitalized online mode while e-governance is supposed to have a much broader aim of using the same mode for ultimately enhancing citizens' participation in the decision-making process that concerns their life. In this sense e-government has an inherent trend towards codification while e-governance, by the very fact that it has *governance* as a foundation, is more of a learning process, exploratory in nature and based on trial and error method, with a goal to develop a shared experience and collective sense of purpose among the rulers and the ruled. For obvious reasons, the latter has much deeper implications for democratic governance in which people's pro-active participation in the governing process remains the core objective. There is, to reiterate, lot of confusion arising out of the lack of appropriate understanding and conceptualization of e-governance and e-government. The following observation, made in no uncertain terms, supports our contention:

"The most compelling observation to be made is that there is substantial overload on the term 'e-governance' itself, making it some overarching metaphor for magical reform. Plenty of *e-administration* initiatives—even long overdue citizen conveniences like public utility bill e-payments—are being passed off as e-governance, as if there is no difference between the two. It is important to remember that e-governance is *governance first and electronic next*.

Currently much government decision-making is non-participatory and discourages citizen inputs, so passing off service delivery improvements alone as governance is misplaced."<sup>8</sup>

Accordingly, in the case of the e-government the primary thrust is on developing G2G (government to government) and then, G2B (government to business) interfaces. There is also the scheme for G2C (government to citizen) *services* (as distinct from interfaces) in the e-government initiatives. In the case of e-governance, in which devising and realization of the means citizen-intervention and participation in the decision-making process in/by governance remains the most significant objective, the overwhelming thrust goes beyond the realms of G2G, G2B and G2C to have the ultimate focus on G2C (government of citizen) and most importantly, on C2G (citizen to government) interfaces. On the basis of the simultaneous interdependence and divergence between e-governance and e-government the paper relies on two basic premises. First, that governance in general and e-governance in particular have to be *inclusive* in character. The central idea is that amidst the increasingly evident Digital Divide which has much adverse effects on the developing

countries, it is not just sufficient to stress the enhancement of efficiency of governance by backing it with the power of the ICT. It is as much necessary to ensure *inclusiveness*, with a view to enhance the effectiveness of governance and that of the ICT, by inclusion of various strata of society—the backward and weaker sections, women, youths, elderly, the displaced and so forth—so that the ordinary people can enjoy the benefits, not just in terms of services but also in terms of having opportunities for intervention, arising out of the synergy of transparent, responsive and accountable governance and people-centric ICT. Second, India having a federal system, with the states having reasonably large space for policy formulation and implementation, there cannot be a rigid and uniform formula for establishing e-governance in India, that too without any effective deliberations at the policymaking stage.

Before we proceed to mention the e-government initiatives in AP in greater details it should be noted that the relevant documents of the state government in AP overwhelmingly mention “e-government” as its major goal but in terms of its desired effects and implications the distinction between e-governance and e-government remains considerably blurred. Thus, for instance, a website of the AP government has the following text as the introductory note:

“Andhra Pradesh has moved *faster and further on the road to e-governance* than any other state in India. The State has undertaken various *e-Government initiatives* to provide better, more efficient, transparent and responsive services to the citizens and to promote greater efficiency within the government.”<sup>9</sup> [Italics mine].

Such conceptual confusion and ambiguity give rise to two possible criticisms. First, one can justifiably make a critique of it and attribute it to the lack of basic understanding of the task of governance. Second, even if one accepts, for argument’s sake, that e-government, as distinct from e-governance, is the most important agenda of the rulers in the state the question that immediately comes to the fore is whether by limiting themselves to the promotion of e-government AP is privileging technological and technical efficiency and in the process is moving away, consciously or otherwise, from the broader goal of democratic governance. Then again, the whole issue becomes all the more complex. It is because, as the following two sections would make it evident, insofar as the initiatives undertaken are concerned they are apparently much more geared towards digitalization and automation of administration and administrative/organizational efficiency in terms of cost-effectiveness. But at the same time, there are some provisions which are, in some instances quite evidently and in some other instances by implications, intertwined with e-governance. Let us refer to two major documents—the highly-valued *Vision 2020*<sup>10</sup> and *Vision of e-Government in Andhra Pradesh*<sup>11</sup> [hereafter, *Vision Paper*], both considered to be ‘landmarks’, to substantiate the point. The following sections on SMARTGOV and TRPI are exclusively based on these documents.

## II

### SMARTGOV: The Foundation

The much-publicized SMARTGOV can be regarded both as a sort of infrastructure and as an end-product of e-government in AP. It stands for simple, moral, accountable, responsive and transparent government. The scheme is inscribed in the *Vision 2020* itself which proclaims that measures are being taken to ensure that “people continue to have a strong voice and role in the governance of their state.” This, to add, conforms to its goal of providing “clean, capable and transparent government which facilitates, and not controls, economic development.” It should also be pointed out that SMART has been linked to the Governance Reform Programme of the Government of AP. The document, *Knowledge, Technology, People: Profile of Centre for Good Governance*<sup>12</sup>, bears testimony to this fact. Let us see more elaborately what the SMARTGOV stands for:

- *Simplifying government* entails assistance to departments to improve the quality of service and value for money to customers by easing the delivery systems and reducing administrative and non-productive expenditure.
- *Moral government* entails the identification of key issues leading to ineffective and inefficient human resource management across the public service and to develop options to solve these problems. It also refers to the development of human resource management action plan and support to the government in implementing the plan and in embedding new structures and modern approaches to human resource management.
- *Accountable government* aims to improve the quality and timeliness of service delivery through the development of a flexible results-focused performance culture across the public service using systems effectively monitoring and measuring performance. It also seeks to promote local government reforms in accordance with the 73rd and 74th amendments of the Constitution of India in order to make the rural and urban local bodies more accountable to the people.
- *Responsive government* seeks to ensure that the people have a strong voice in governance of the state and local bodies through the development of participatory mechanisms for planning and monitoring service delivery, enhancing decentralization and delegation, promoting environmental conservation and ensuring inclusiveness of the poor and the disadvantaged.
- *Transparent government* visualizes improvement in planning, resource allocation, monitoring, management and accounting systems and access to information at state and local levels so that accountability is clear and public expenditure is transparent, prudent and effective.



In accordance with our observation that the e-government agenda of the government contains some notable provisions of e-governance we can refer to the key provisions of the SMARTGOV. It can be seen that while the first key provision, that is, *simplifying government*, is basically oriented towards e-government the rest of the provisions in varying ways and degrees incorporate some of the major goals and objectives of e-governance. Thus, the key provision of *moral government* includes among others the task of “embedding new structures and modern approaches to human resource management”. It hardly needs any elaboration to understand that such new structures and modern approaches require substantive popular participation that goes beyond technological upgradation. In another significant instance, the key provision of *accountable government* “seeks to promote local government reforms in accordance with the 73rd and 74th amendments” in order to “make the rural and urban local bodies more accountable to the people”. The specific amendments being mentioned here were themselves justified on the ground that they would facilitate people’s participation in governance at the local level. The extensive restructuring of the institutions of local governance was given constitutional legitimacy by these twin amendments. The key provision of *responsive government* more vehemently calls for making governance people-centric when it suggests various means of ensuring that “the people have a strong voice in governance” and calls for developing “participatory mechanisms” and “inclusiveness of the poor and the disadvantaged”. Yet another key provision, that of the *transparent government*, at least by implication, promotes the cause of e-governance in its emphasis on “access to information”. In the section on “Inconsistency Writ Large” we shall refer yet again to *Vision 2020* along with the New ICT Policy 2005-2010<sup>13</sup>; the latter is supposed to be the latest componential addition to the foundation of the SMARTGOV. It could be mentioned here that the New ICT policy makes no radical departure from *Vision 2020* and the *Vision Paper*, despite being formulated under a different political regime.

### **TRPI: The Functional Framework**

Yet when it comes to the functional framework it reflects a clear preference for technological and technocratic dimensions of e-government. If one makes a brief survey of the four key components of the framework of *e-government* the point becomes evident. They are:

- **Technology Framework** which has as its core the ICT architecture. It is supposed to present overall standards and policies for key technology components to enable reusability and to ensure interoperability and integration of the various e-government projects across the State.
- **Resource Framework** which relates to a variety of solutions in the generic name of Public-Private Partnerships, which are being employed

to bridge the gap between the expected levels of speed, efficiency and spread of public projects. The idea is to arrive at the right combination of public sector accountability with private sector efficiencies and also to share the risk correspondingly.

- **Prioritisation Framework** which relies on technological application in various governmental departments in terms of logical grouping, high level assessment of key and supportive processes, mapping of core processes, prioritization of services on a criticality and feasibility matrix, categorization of services as “targeted”, “processed”, “permitted” and “kept on hold”.
- **Implementation Framework**, with the 6C model at its core, tries to incorporate the essential features of a structured approach for successful implementation of IT projects. It is claimed to have developed from the experience of implementing/coordinating a number of projects in the government departments in AP.

The objectives of e-government, enumerated in the *Vision Paper*, also reinstate the same. Thus in the section on “Benefits to Citizens and Business” the objectives being referred to are: streamlined and standardised electronic information gathering and access; electronic delivery of services to meet citizens expectations and requirements; convenient, anytime, anywhere citizen services; support for e-commerce initiatives; significant improvement in government to citizen (G2C) and government to business (G2B) interfaces. In the section on “Benefits to Government” the objectives include increased employee productivity; facilitation of information reuse within governmental departments; reduced system maintenance and training requirements; cost-effectiveness in the operation of government agencies; improvement in government to government (G2G) interfaces. Yet another source of contradiction is the declaration that the AP government would follow an Entrepreneurial Approach with the “state as the single entrepreneur”, which would, by the constitutive logic, view the citizens as consumers. How far does it go with the vision, however segmented, of e-governance is yet another question that needs to be raised.

Even the three sectors in which the AP government claims to have achieved lot of success remain confined to the parameters of e-government. It is to be noted that even within the parameters of e-government the success stories are basically confined to the front-end agencies of various government departments. The three “most successful cases” are:

- **CARD** — Computer-Aided Administration of Registration Department, which in effect seeks to provide end-to-end solution for the automation of registration process. It has cut down the time for sales registration from 10 days to less than an hour.
- **e-Seva** — The one-stop-shop for citizen services. Publicized as “the

first of its kind of service in the country”, it is supposed to provide a wide spectrum of citizen-friendly services like utility bills/tax payments, issue of certificates, issue of licenses/permits, reservations and more on a one-stop basis. We shall deal with this sector subsequently.

- **FAST** — Fully Automated System for Transport, whereby offices of the Regional Transport Officers are being connected, and services like issue of learner’s licenses, driving licenses and registration of vehicles have been computerised.

### **Inconsistency Writ Large**

The greatest irony of AP is that while its policymakers take pride in making it a hi-tech hub, an alarming number of farmers are committing suicides in the state due to lack of necessary information about the market price of their products. The question that becomes relevant at this point of discussion is whether there is any inconsistency, if not outright contradiction, between the TRPI and the SMARTGOV? If one finds any incongruity between the two important segments it immediately brings in the question of design-defect in the specific roadmap being discussed here. Such design-defect is not just a technical issue; it has greater social and political implications as well. To elaborate, if the functional framework points to a great surge towards realizing G2G and G2B interfaces, they by themselves are a welcome trend for achieving efficient government. However, if their single-minded promotion comes in the way of C2G interface the whole process of policy formulation begins to suffer from ‘democratic deficit’, leaving little opportunity for “people’s voice” that finds so much prominence in the vision itself.

As mentioned earlier, one can look for the roots of the ambiguities and contradictions being mentioned here in the *Vision Paper* itself. In its very introductory line the *Vision Paper* links the electronic technology to the “empowerment” of the people. It then moves on to enumerate, in a typical e-government mode, the utilization of the electronic technology for providing efficient service delivery to the people and to ensure feedback from them. At the same time, however, the vision proclaims the goal of transforming AP into a “knowledge society” by leading the way through the ICT. The ambiguity and contradiction assumes glaring proportions in methodological terms here. It is because if the e-government seeks to “reduce personalized interface” between the government and the people it would continue to weaken one of the prime preconditions of knowledge society (and for that matter, of e-governance too)—the extensive and intensive interaction between the government and the people for enhancing *capacity-building*. The foundation of the knowledge society, as clarified by its proponents, is democratization of knowledge, which again is a result of increasing interactions and deliberations among people themselves and between the rulers and the ruled.

It needs to be specifically mentioned at this juncture that insofar as the inconsistencies or contradictions are concerned the change of regime—from the rule of Telugu Desham Party (TDP) to the Congress—the methodology remains unaltered. One of the best instances of lack of fundamental change is the New ICT Policy 2005-2010. The author's interviews with a number of bureaucrats, political activists and academics repeatedly put forth the point that the *Vision Paper*, formulated during Naidu's days, remains as sacrosanct as ever to the policymakers, with the change in government and the assumption of power by an arch-rival party having little impact on the process. The New ICT Policy, titled *Path-Breaking Initiatives to Promote e-Governance & ICT Industry in the State*, has e-governance as one of the two main sections. This might give rise to the impression that it would be based on a methodological and visionary departure from the *Vision Paper* and in the process would do away with the conceptual and functional ambiguities of e-government/e-governance. But a closer look at the Policy document reveals that it treads the same line. There are plenty of provisions which may facilitate the promotion of the ICT industry but remain thoroughly inadequate to promote e-governance. Some such provisions are "embedding" through deployment of technology within the governmental departments, introduction of the Geographical Information System (GIS), broadband connectivity at district/mandal and village levels and establishment of Rajiv Internet Village for promoting G2C and B2C (business to citizen) interfaces, with no mention of the C2G interface. The document also prioritizes the utilization of the ICT for poverty alleviation under the IT4AP scheme, with identified sectors like irrigation, agriculture, education, health, rural development and so forth. But the whole approach and the discourse remains extremely technocratic with little consideration to the fact that an organic deployment of such technology needs to emerge from a political process in the form of awareness generation and participation of the people for whom they are meant. Thus, the New ICT policy, at best, offers only cosmetic changes.

*Vision 2020*, yet another significant instance with much implications for governance, describes people as "partners in progress" and calls for their "active participation" in development. This kind of provision intensifies the puzzle—in which after a point of time e-government comes in the way of e-governance. There could be many reasons for such inconsistency. However, keeping in mind our focus on the *design-defect* we can trace it to a commonly propounded thesis in the discourse of ICT, which finds a very prominent place in *Vision 2020*. We are referring to the Leapfrogging Thesis. A quote from *Vision 2020* would reveal the spirit and the letter of the thesis:

"(With) (t)remendous advances in knowledge and information technology...governments can now make quantum leaps in productivity and efficiency, leapfrogging several stages of development their predecessors had to undergo."<sup>14</sup> [Brackets mine].

It is in this very idea that the ICT by itself is a 'magic wand' that is able to do away with the rigours and stages of development the root of the problem can be found. This kind of discourse also floats the much-absurd idea that in some way or other the *grassroots-level* constraints and obstacles can be overcome by the power of New Technology. It is also our contention that the poorer a country or a region or an area is the greater the intensity of such argument. In this context one has to remember that AP is much lower down the order in terms of intra-state scale of human development in India. The *National Human Development Report*<sup>15</sup> of the Planning Commission of India place AP in 19th position vis-a-vis the Human Poverty Index and an even lowly 23rd vis-a-vis the Human Development Index. The gravest and most disastrous manifestation of it has been the continuing episodes of the farmers' suicides in rural AP but there are other areas of human development as well in which AP is faring badly<sup>16</sup>. The implications of such misleading discourse is not just confined to the fact that the existential, real life and everyday problems of governance are sought to be overrun by the on-line, virtual 'click'. There are other implicaitons as well. It even threatens to undermine some of the positive initiatives which, if expanded, could contribute to better governance. The e-Seva Centres can serve as an instance here. Our visits to sch centres in different localities of Hyderabad, including Sanjiva Reddy Nagar, Nallakunta and Charminar areas, showed great enthusiasm of the common people of different social echelons in trying to take advantage of one of the e-government's major feature: single-window online services. In all these centres noticeable presence was found of the women, both as assistants in the centers and as users. The number of elderly citizens was also significant. Being situated in the locality itself the centres also attracted a number of physically challenged citizens. All these traits make the centres a sort of hub of *inclusiveness*. The people interviewed by us were near-unanimous in agreement at least on two points: first, that because of the centres, and with the consequent elimination of multiple organizations, the collection mechanism has improved to a great extent; second, that the centres have also resulted in the elimination of middlemen/intermediaries. It is also a positive indication that the people want more and more services to be brought under the purview of such centres. It is no less a positive trait that the centres are now run on public-private partnership with the management of the centres, initially under the control of the government, now vested with private organizations.

However, the dominance of the "ICT as the magic wand" discourse seems to have eroded the little substantial efforts made to extend the people's positive impression, enthusiasm and participation on a broader scale and horizon—in congruence with the parameters of e-governance. Even e-Seva Centres are not being extended in rural areas with due attention. In this context P.K. Mohanty<sup>17</sup>, the former Municipal Commissioner of Hyderabad and the current Director-General and Executive Director of the Centre for Good Governance, argued

that these centres were “bound to fail” in rural areas. His first explanation of the impending failure was basically technological in the sense that he argued that unlike the urban areas, the rural areas are marked by “lack of proper domain work”. However, Mohanty would go as far as to make a significant comment that as “there was no well thought-out design” in the deployment of the ICT in the administrative circle the prospects of e-governance remain “centuries away”.

Be it the issue of urban bias in e-Seva Centers or that in developing e-readiness it is only the tip of the iceberg. To reiterate, one has to go deeper into the broader question of deficiency in designing e-governance and still deeper, into the question of designing governance as such. One defence, as found in the arguments of the TDP activists and the general supporters of Naidu, is that the urban tilt was part of the “overall plan” which was seeking to establish e-government in urban areas and then to take advantage of the “trickle down” effect to spread it in rural areas. There is a general belief among Naidu’s supporters that he had some nice schemes and he needed more time to implement them on a trickle-down mode basis, beyond the urban sector. But the counter-argument is that the vision—as per *Vision 2020*, of a “golden” AP, characterized among other traits by “total eradication of poverty”, “basic minimum needs”, “happy fulfilling life” and “knowledge and learning society”—was bound to fail because it only “privileged the already privileged segments”<sup>18</sup>.

### III

#### The Naidu Factor

The name and the initiatives of Chandrababu Naidu is so much intertwined to AP’s march towards tech-savvy administration (governance, considering its essential attributes, would be too heavy a concept to be used here!) that he remains the central figure in every debate on the issue. This results in a tendency to attribute both the success and the failure, as the case may be with the respective analysts, to Naidu and Naidu only. Best-known around the world for his self-admitted obsession with the ICT and the corporatisation of governance, “Babu”, as he is locally called, loved to describe himself as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of AP and not unexpectedly, he was the icon of the mainstream media. The following excerpt is a typical instance of the hype that contributed to Naidu’s unparalleled media image:

“Chandrababu Naidu is a dreamer—the master of the grand statement, the painter of the grand vision. By 2020...his state....will be a land of thriving industry, flourishing agriculture and a vast service sector. Poverty will be a faint memory.

A spinner of yarns? Not really. The AP chief minister is only trying to get the people and the administration to think and act big, like himself...The

cyberdreamer has shown the impossible can be done. *Electronic governance, for instance*. The critics said that it was too farfetched, that it was elitist. Today...they have been proved wrong.”<sup>19</sup> [Italics mine]

No question, Naidu indeed had provided a great incentive to bring changes in AP through the use of the ICT. In fact, the main inspiration behind *Vision 2020* was none other than Naidu himself. Judging by the document itself, as we have noted earlier, it would be wrong to assume that Naidu's vision was strictly limited to the promotion of e-government only. The “golden AP” that he dreamt of was not certainly to be achieved only by one-window online services. But the fact remains that it is one thing to visualize a grand-order and another thing to transform the vision into an appropriate design. We would in this context contend that Naidu in terms of his rhetoric made the right kind of noise but he and his team of high-tech policymakers did not back it up by appropriate action. It is quite ironical that the man who would work so hard to vastly improve service delivery system and information access would fail to measure the pulse of the electorate and would be swept out of power. An important report<sup>20</sup> explains Naidu's fate quite succinctly:

“Had governance been only an exercise in management and the CM its CEO, e-governance could have facilitated all its functions being performed more efficiently....But ... there comes a stage when mere affectionate access or concern is not enough. Providing direct and quicker access cannot ensure full participation...

Governance is, however, not merely navigation. It is the exercise of power. Democracy is demand for a share in that power.”

It is because Naidu's promotion of e-government at the cost of e-governance and more broadly, the governance itself, was based on a technocratic-managerial approach, and in epistemological terms, in technologism<sup>21</sup>. In this kind of approach it is only natural that after a point of time his gameplan would be neutralized by the very force—politics—that he sought to do away with. “Development without politics” was not only Naidu's pet slogan; it was his ultimate goal. Then again, it is a contradiction in terms. Politics as a contestation, struggle over power has a built-in quality to raise its head with greater intensity, more so in a democratic order, when faced with ‘suppression’ by the powers that be. Naidu's obsession with the ICT, backed up by his premise that “technology is value-neutral”, led him to undermine this attribute of politics despite his being an astute politician. He was regarding “cutting edge” technology as a sort of magic-wand which would help him with *top-down* development and in the process would do away with all existing constraints to “efficient governance”.

In Naidu's scheme of things the “SMART government” required customers and consumers in people, not pro-active political beings. It is precisely for this reason that democratic decentralization of governance was a blindspot in Naidu's agenda of development, despite the highly publicized

Janmabhoomi Programme which was supposedly, though not effectively, adopted for “taking governance to the people”. Despite the fact that policies are seldom products of a single individual the ‘personality factor’ here need not be underestimated, especially when it concerns a high profile and powerful figure like Naidu. Before we refer specifically to the Programme let us mention a very interesting description of Naidu—“He doesn’t listen, he only commands”.<sup>22</sup> The cryptic description itself indicates a behavioural trait towards centralization of power, which induces Malla Reddy to further comment that in a district like Ananthapur, with “zero-initiative” in ensuring access to and participation of people vis-a-vis the ICT, “e-governance remains totally elusive”. One finds an echo of the same in yet another characterization<sup>23</sup> of Naidu’s *modus operandi*: vertical flow of information to the *individual at the top*, that is, Naidu himself. In a way, it was a classic instance of G2G interface in which at one end Naidu was the government personified. Today, Naidu is no longer in power and Rajasekhar Reddy is perceived to be less obsessed with himself as the ‘ultimate terminal’ of the ICT-guided vertical information flow. However, as stated earlier, there has been little change in the basic concept and structure of the deployment of the ICT. If one has to identify the *missing link* between e-government and e-governance here it is the political commitment to decentralization.

### **Democratic Decentralization: Bridge too Far**

One must go beyond the ‘Naidu factor’ to avoid the pitfall of reducing the whole issue to an individual’s confused perception. Significant policy issues, such as e-governance, has its broader dimensions as well and it is because of this the notion of democratic decentralization comes into our discussion, though more for its absence, rather than its presence. In the following discussion we identify democratic decentralization as the ‘missing link’ in the e-governance scenario in AP.

Democratic Decentralization both as a concept and as a process, is much more politically loaded<sup>24</sup> than the allied concepts like *delegation* and *deconcentration*. The latter two are more oriented towards administrative rearrangement and reorganization and have less enduring character than the former which calls for thorough restructuring. In India states like Kerala, West Bengal, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, at different points of time and in different ways, have embarked on democratic decentralization and have met with success in terms of local governance in varying degrees. The purview of the article does not permit a detailed discussion on the point, but at the same time it needs to be emphasized that this has facilitated in comparative terms greater participation of people both in terms of choosing their representatives in the institutions of local governance and in terms of articulating demands about the ways and means of local development, say, on the utilization of funds, the formation of the budget, the state of the schemes



and so forth. Popular participation is so vital because it further facilitates awareness-generation about the ICT and in measuring and increasing demand for access to data and information. Such data and information have an exceedingly wide range—relating to livelihood activities (like agriculture, industry and business), health, education, market, infrastructure, scientific-technological, policy-oriented, general and so forth. This way popular participation lays the foundation for governance in general and both e-government and e-governance in particular. There is no instance in the world of a successfully run of e-governance with weak local foundation. It is simply because any technology, including the high-potential ICT, has to cater to the local needs and in order to do so it has to have a 'give and take' relations with the local knowledge, skill and resources.

But in the absence of any determined endeavour to establish democratic decentralization the question of popular participation and empowerment of people through ICT remain only a rhetoric, attractive political slogans, which are constructed and circulated in effect to keep people at bay. AP has acquired a dubious distinction of being a state which, despite the constitutional mandate to the contrary, manages to suppress democratic decentralization. Before we mention in the ensuing discussion how the subversion of institutions of local governance in AP is taking place let us mention that time and again it has been seen that popular participation, if sought to be controlled, programmed and minimized from above, gives rise to the countertrends. We can, at some length, quote Jose Mooij who made the following comment<sup>25</sup> during the tenure of Naidu, to show that AP is also subject to this paradox:

"...the process.. (or keeping) politics away from policy implementation ... leads, in any case, to three related contradictions. First, the developmentalist discourse produces expectations....that even when he schemes fail and are criticised, there is still 'the fact that the people are willing to debate the development agenda', it means that the discourse will strike back...

Second is the contradiction between modern management and party building. The regime works on both—but at some point, of course, they are no longer compatible. Party building involves money and the diversion of funds...In the Food for Work programme...(t)he diversions were so many and it involved so much money that it attracted the attention, not only of the opposition, but also of the media.

Third, the contradiction between centralisation and participation. Policy-making is centralised, but policy implementation is supposed to be participatory. People are supposed to become 'partners in development'. But partnership requires ownership, and this requires some kind of say in processes of agenda setting and local policy design. This is not happening." [Brackets mine]

The rulers in AP, however, seem to be hardly aware of the contradictions. This is despite the fall of Naidu. It is widely known that the prospects of local governance in AP are marked by the paucity of all the four vital elements—

popularly known as 4F Model—funds, functions, functionaries and freedom. Ironical it may sound, even though AP had been one of the pioneering states of India in terms of providing legal legitimacy to local government by the way of passing a legislative act way back in 1959, it has lagged behind in the surge towards democratic decentralization. There is a definite measuring rod by which one can explain AP's "laggard" status in this respect. While the 11th Schedule of the Constitution provides the scope for the transfer of no less than 29 subjects to the local government in AP the number remains confined to only 17<sup>26</sup>. Even in cases where transfers of subjects took place little attempt was made to transfer concerned functionaries and finances for the transferred subjects to take effect in the arena of local government. This apart, unlike Kerala and Madhya Pradesh AP has avoided the establishment of the District Planning Committees (DPCs), thereby subverting the scope for local level planning. No less important, the devolution of financial powers in the state has been negligible, with the Zilla Parishads and Mandal Parishads<sup>27</sup> remaining dependent on the state government. In AP, the Zilla Parishad has no control over the District Rural Development Authority (DRDA), which as a repository of the poverty alleviation programmes, has huge funds at its disposal.

If that is not all, the establishment of the Village Secretariat (*Gram Sachivalayam*) in January, 2002 and the Janmabhoomi Programme are said to be having adverse effects on the functioning of the local government in the state. The former has led to a sort of individualization of governance through the functions and role of the Village Secretary who has at the disposal as many as sixty functions relating to the departments of police, revenue, Panchayats and so forth. The latter has effected over-bureaucratization and the *spoils system* (appointment of political activists)—none of which are healthy developments in the context of democratic governance. Both the Village Secretariat and the state-sponsored Janmabhoomi Programme apparently sought to strengthen 'governance' at the local level but ended up in opposite direction because both were meant to enforce what I prefer to describe as *centralization through decentralization*. In the case of the Janmabhoomi Programme the organizations<sup>28</sup> that were introduced to enunciate development from different vantage points apparently, were basically subverting the representative institutions and concentrating power in the hands of government officials headed by the District Collector at the top and the Nodal Officer at the operational level. G. Krishna Reddy puts it graphically<sup>29</sup>:

"Apparently Janmabhoomi denounces the bureaucracy for its failures, but relocates it in crucial position in the form of nodal agency. What it in reality hits are the local representative institutions, by introducing a whole range of unrepresentative bodies at the village level... These committees have systematically usurped the functions constitutionally entrusted to (P)anchayats... The local representative institutions have come under severe attack by the government of AP essentially in two manifested forms: a parallel

set of institutions have been built around Janmabhoomi in the name of making people at the centre of development but ironically, without any representative character, and drying up financial resources of (P)anchayats and strengthening the hands of local bureaucratic machinery in disbursing the funds under Janmabhoomi". [Brackets mine]

AP is also losing yet another opportunity to link the self-help groups (SHGs), a number of which are constituted by rural women in the BPL (Below the Poverty Line) category, to the rejuvenation of rural local institutions. The much-publicised Velugu programme of the AP government has made some headway in creating and sustaining SHGs in terms of utilizing the power of micro-credit in social mobilization and in generating a bit of income but when it comes to the question of empowerment it is yet to strike at the roots. It is because the Velugu programme is yet to devise a strategy to link the energy of the members of the SHGs to political aspirations. If it could do so, AP would have a number of rural women in rural local governance. In that case, democratic decentralization would have become gender-sensitive. This limitation of the Velugu programme is acknowledged by analysts, such as, Deshpande-Ranadive<sup>30</sup> who categorically states in the specific context of women empowerment that an increase in income, livelihood and assets does not necessarily lead to 'empowerment' in the true sense of the term. The analyst identifies<sup>31</sup> social inclusion and people's participation in generating action and voice as 'catalysts' that empower people through positive shifts in economic, physical, socio-cultural, political and mental spaces. The New ICT Policy provides that it would seek to associate the SHGs, especially those constituted by women, to set up and manage the Rajiv kiosks but it is, considering the agenda (or, lack of it) we are discussing here, is only a small cosmetic measure.

In the more specific context of e-governance such scant regard for democratic decentralization implies missing the opportunity of laying the local foundation of e-governance through local-level need-based assessment, information sharing, networking (both informational and social) and participatory appraisal and last but not the least, democratic access to the ICT. Krishna Reddy<sup>32</sup> in this context explains how the much-hyped schemes like APVAN (Andhra Pradesh Value Added Network) programme, under which some key functions like revenue, commercial taxes, transport, registration, employment exchanges, utilities and procurements were to be contracted out to a Singapore-based private company, would make information "totally inaccessible" to the ordinary people. One must in the same breath note that several civil society organizations, such as, Lok Satta<sup>33</sup>, in AP have initiated a vigorous campaign for the "empowerment of local government", which, among other key objectives like implementation of the Right to Information, also visualises the formation of Federation for Empowerment of Local Governments not just in AP but also in other states of India. But the struggle seems to be a

long-term one if one considers the fact that the task involves making a recalcitrant government, irrespective of the regime change, amenable to reason.

#### IV

##### Conclusion

To sum up, the AP case is a typical instance of the manifestations of putting 'e' before governance, of privileging the means over the ends. Our exploration of the AP scenario reveals that there is a sort of 'auto-closure' (in the sense of deliberate and self-imposed limitations) insofar as making the transition from e-government to e-governance is concerned. Such propensity, resulting in chronic disjointed 'flow' and lack of localisation, is a consequence of the failure to realize that the Digital Divide is both the cause and consequence of the social divide and the political divide, both marked by a yawning gap between the rulers and the ruled. But the problem lies not with the ICT but with the people who fail to extract the benefits of its potential.

We have at the outset described governance as a learning process with trial-and-error method. E-governance, if it is to act as an instrument of 'reaching the unreached and voicing the voiceless', is not an exception to the rule. We have also elaborated why such process must involve a bottom-up approach, in consultation with the local people. With the advent of the ICT and its inevitable positioning in governance there are two possible routes to its utilization. First, one can take recourse to the technological upgradation of government services to ensure efficient service delivery. Second, one can seek to ensure people's access and pro-active participation in decision-making by, among other things, making the use of ICT for this purpose to embark on improved governance. Both can be pursued simultaneously as both put premium, though in different degree and different extent, on the change-initiative by respecting the public value of information, identifying the user needs, defining the information-seeking behaviour of the potential and actual beneficiaries and establishing various linkages from the local level upwards. But it requires high conceptual clarity backed up by appropriate policies. If for various constraints the latter, that is, e-governance, cannot be put immediately on the agenda of governance, the former, that is, e-government, can be taken up for the time being. But this very act, if adopted at the level of policymaking, should be clarified and made transparent without resorting to the rhetoric and illusory promise of e-governance. It is where the AP rulers falter. Till the day such state of affairs continue the question—*democratic governance, which way now?*—would continue to confront them along with the ordinary people of the state. As such, it is a formidable question; it is even more formidable for those who refuse to learn lessons from experience.

## Acknowledgements

This paper is based on a segment of a broader project titled *Towards Inclusive e-Governance in India: Comparing West Bengal with Select Indian States*, partly funded by the UGC-DRS Programme Phase I of the Department of Political Science, Calcutta University. The project, in exploring the state of policy vision and the modes of policymaking and policy implementation and the simultaneous scrutiny of the local foundation of e-governance, seeks to defuse the hype in the Indian policy-circle, media and popular perception about e-governance, without, however, minimizing the importance of the ICT in governance and development. I thank the Coordinator of the DRS Programme (Phase I), Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, and all my colleagues in the Department of Political Science, Calcutta University, for selecting this particular segment of the project for funding. I also wish to thank I. Ramabrahmam, G. Krishna Reddy, A. Murali, P. Selvyn, Y. Pardhasarathy, P. K. Mohanty, Malla Reddy, P. Sanjay and S. Venkatamalu for sharing their insights on the Andhra Pradesh scenario during my field-trip. I would also like to thank a number of college teachers from different parts of Andhra Pradesh, who provided relevant and valuable information to shape my perception during my periodic visits to Hyderabad Central University. Usual disclaimers apply.

## Notes and References

1. It should be mentioned at the outset that while both *democratic governance* and *e-governance* occupy the centrestage of the research on governance in general they at the same time remain, with few exceptions, separate points of reference and there is little research which intimately relates these two core concepts. This could perhaps be directly linked to the lack of intense theory-building efforts in the area keeping in mind the existing gap between theory and practice. For interesting elaboration, S. Sahay, S. and G. Walsham, "Information Technology in Developing Countries: A Need for Theory Building", *Information Technology for Development*, Vol. 6, Nos. 3 & 4, 1995. pp. 111-124.
2. In this paper we use the term *localization* in a broader context—by going beyond the more widely discussed issue of the local language content and locally relevant content of the ICT. See in this context, Kenneth Keniston, "Grassroots ICT Projects in India: Some Preliminary Hypothesis", *ASCI Journal of Management*, Vol. 31., No. 2, 2002; also available at the website [web.mit.edu/~kken/public/FILES/courses.htm](http://web.mit.edu/~kken/public/FILES/courses.htm) In our case, the process of localization very much includes the ground-level 'spadework' for creating suitable ambience, in the form of establishing a democratic and participatory order in local level decision-making, which we regard as extremely important in ensuring access of the ordinary people to the ICT and its democratization. To repeat, this linkage is largely missing in the current output of research on the ICT.
3. I am deliberately using the term Information and Communication Technology,

rather than the more familiar term Information Technology (IT), to stress on the vital element and role of communication—not only in its structural and technological dimension but also in its significance as a social process.

4. In another segment of the same research project of the author the e-governance roadmap of the state of West Bengal has been critically analysed in the specific contexts of the democratization of media technology and the Geographical Information System (GIS) respectively. See Dipankar Sinha, "Emerging Media Technology in the Third World: A Reality Check in West Bengal", *Telemedium* (USA), Vol. 51, No. 2, Fall, 2004, pp. 39-44; Dipankar Sinha, "Information Technology and Citizen Participation: Macro-Lessons from a Micro-Study", *Global Media Journal* (Indian edition), Vol. 1, No. 1, November, 2005, pp. 1-16. Available at website: [www.manipal.edu/gmj/issues/nov05/dipankar.php](http://www.manipal.edu/gmj/issues/nov05/dipankar.php)
5. For an understanding of the deficiencies and problems in the developing countries, Kenneth Keniston and Deepak Kumar, *IT Experience in India: Bridging the Digital Divide*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2004. This volume concentrates on India but the points discussed are relevant for other developing countries as well.
6. Richard Heeks, "E-government for Development: Basic Definitions", [www.egov4.org/egovdefn.htm](http://www.egov4.org/egovdefn.htm) Accessed on 20 October, 2002; Richard Heeks, "Understanding e-Governance for Development", [www.unige.ch/iued/wsis/DEVDOT/00341.HTM](http://www.unige.ch/iued/wsis/DEVDOT/00341.HTM) Yet another important website—that of Digital Governance.org Initiative—dealing with conceptualization of the theme is <http://216.197.119.113/artman/publish/concept.shtml>.
7. The term 'citizen' is used here in a conventional sense to denote the members of the State, who are at least legally entitled to the service delivery.
8. S. Vincent and A. Mahesh, "E isn't Everything", 16 April, 2005, website [indiatogether.org](http://indiatogether.org) Retrieved on 20 April, 2005.
9. [www.ap-it.com/index.html](http://www.ap-it.com/index.html)
10. *Vision 2020*, Government of Andhra Pradesh, Hyderabad, 1999.
11. *Vision of e-Government in Andhra Pradesh*, Department of Information Technology and Communications, Government of Andhra Pradesh, April, 2002.
12. *Knowledge, Technology, People: Profile of Centre for Good Governance*, Centre for Good Governance, Hyderabad, 2004, pp. 1-2.
13. *New ICT Policy 2005-2010*, Government of Andhra Pradesh, Hyderabad, 2005.
14. *Vision 2020*, p. 8.
15. *National Human development Report 2001*, Planning Commission, Government of India, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002, p. 144 and p. 141. Both are the combined figures of the rural and urban sectors. Incidentally, there has been no new edition of the report till date.
16. AP has been in the news for the suicide cases of thousand of farmers. But there is more to its dismal record in human development: it has the largest number of child labourers in the country and close to ninety per cent of rural workers are either illiterate or educated only up to the primary level. Employment growth saw a drastic decline in the Naidu era. In rural Andhra Pradesh, it was 2.4

per cent per annum in the decade before him. It fell to 0.29 per cent during 1994-2000. The rate of growth of real wages in rural areas also declined sharply in the 1990s. What the media fondly called "One of the fastest-growing states" was really stumbling. The growth of GDP was just around 5 per cent for 1994-2001. Lowest among the southern states and lower than the national average. Lower than what the same state had posted during 1981-91. Only three states, Rajasthan, Haryana and Maharashtra had showed higher growth than A.P. in the 1980s. However, this rank sank from number four to eight in the next decade. AP also showed no improvement in its Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) between the first and second National Family Health Surveys. AP's IMR rate is 65 which is close to Bihar's 62. (Source: P. Sainath, "Chandrababu: Image and Reality", [www.indiatogether.org/2004/jul/psa-cbabu.htm](http://www.indiatogether.org/2004/jul/psa-cbabu.htm))

17. Personal conversation with the author on 26 March, 2005.
18. Interview of G. Krishna Reddy, taken on 25 March, 2005.
19. *Businessworld*, 7-21 March, 1999, p. 23.
20. *Empowerment of Local Governments: A Lok Satta Report*, Lok Satta, Hyderabad, 2004, pp. 105-106.
21. I am thankful to Amartya Mukhopadhyay for raising this point as part of his intervention after my presentation of the draft of this paper on 20 December, 2005. While a thorough discussion on technologism, tempting as it is, is beyond the scope of this paper, it can be noted that technologism, in its twenty first century-manifestation, is giving rise to the hyped concepts of e-democracy and e-society, concepts which have little to prescribe in terms of restructuring the local institutional configuration and process.
22. Malla Reddy of Rural Development Trust, Ananthapur.  
Interview taken on 26 March, 2005.
23. P. Sanjay, Advocacy Associate, Foundation for Democratic Reforms. Personal conversation with the author on 27 March, 2005.
24. It is in the sense that the visualisation and implementation of democratic decentralization requires establishment of relatively autonomous local institutions of governance, composed of the representatives of the people. This by itself requires an electoral process. In contrast, delegation or deconcentration are just based on mechanical transfer of some select functions, mainly for administrative convenience, from the 'higher' authorities to the 'lower' levels. For a relatively good theoretical exposure, D. Burns et al., *The Politics of Decentralization*, McMillan, Hampshire, 1994. Especially the chapter on "Rethinking Local Democracy", pp. 30-51. For a provocative and informative literature on the India context, UNDP, *Decentralization in India: Challenges and Opportunities*, Discussion Paper 1, New Delhi, n.d..
25. Jose Mooij, *Smart governance? Politics in the Policy Process in Andhra Pradesh, India*, Working Paper 228, October 2003, Overseas Development Institute, London, pp. 22-23. Brackets by the author.
26. *Empowerment of Local Governments*, p. 21.
27. Created, following the initiative of N.T. Rama Rao (the founder of the TDP

and the former Chief Minister of AP), by splitting the Panchayat Samity into *Mandals*, sub-district level units in order to ensure the support of the Kama caste to which Naidu himself belongs) and the backward castes for the party.

28. A couple of notable instances are the Varna Samrakshana Samity for social forestry, Chief Minister's Empowerment for Youth Groups (CMEY-youth groups).
29. G. Krishna Reddy, "New Populism and Liberalisation: Regime Shift under Chandrababu Naidu in AP", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 9, March 2, 2002, pp. 877-878.
30. Joy Deshmukh-Ranadive, *Women's Self-Help Group in Andhra Pradesh: Participatory Poverty Alleviation in Action*, paper presented in World Bank Conference on Scaling Up Poverty Reduction: A Global Learning Process, Sanghai, 2004.
31. Ibid, p. 17.
32. Krishna Reddy, "New Populism and Liberalisation", op.cit., p. 881.
33. Jayaprakash Narayan, *Report on the Concluding Celebrations of the One Crore (10 Million) Signature Campaign for Local Government Empowerment and Workshop on Deepening Democracy*, Lok Satta, Hyderabad, n.d., pp. 3-4.



# **CIVIL SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS IN AND FOR INDIA : A POET'S VIEW AND AFTER**

**Amartya Mukhopadhyay**

## **Civil Society: Definition and Development**

The most current buzzwords in western-generated discourses on democracy in the last decade of the last century and the beginning of the present are 'civil society' (CS) and 'social capital' (SC). When applied to the problematic of development their inevitable companion is 'governance'. The context of the resurgence of the concept of CS was, not only in the popular mind but also in those of certain confused academics, the fall of the socialist regimes in the erstwhile Soviet Union and other East European countries.<sup>1</sup> These people might have been misled on the ground by their wrong reading of the causes of the downfall of socialist systems, and in theory by the triumphalist arguments of Francis Fukuyama.<sup>2</sup> But while he was more consistent than many others in his synthesis of the strands of 'post-history' from Hegel, Kojève and Nietzsche, he preached a kind of finalism about the institutional components of political democracy that might have bemused them.<sup>3</sup> They did not either remember or choose to show that long before the cataclysmic events in the eastern parts of Europe highlighted, in their conception, the relevance of CS in Europe, three different though related developments in Western Europe itself had reestablished the importance of CS in Western socio-political discourses and practices. These were: a) the restructuring of Western European capitalist economies in the mid-and-late-eighties; b) the embittered political controversies surrounding the Keynesian welfare state; and c) the growth of new social movements during the past few decades.<sup>4</sup>

The ways in which these three separate developments contributed to the pressing relevance of the concept of CS were of course different. The first of these, necessitated by the abatement of the growth potential of the long-wave post-war investment and prosperity, brought into sharper relief the dependence of many state policies upon the relatively independent processes of commodity production and exchange within CS; and reversed the trend of the earlier decades of resolving the fundamental tensions between the economic and the political spheres in favour of the latter. The new pre-eminence of economics, helped by the centrifugal tendencies generated by the international monetary and trading systems, grievously undermined the capacity of the Keynesian welfare state to redeem its pledge of sustaining high levels of unemployment. These facilitated a reconsideration of the production and socializing potential of civic institutions.

---

Dr. Mukhopadhyay is Professor in the Department of Political Science, University of Calcutta, Kolkata.

The second factor, i.e. the political controversies surrounding the failure of the aforesaid Keynesian welfare state, also reawakened interest in the time-old distinction. Once the social democratic recipe of interjecting, through political power and sponsored planning, political in contradistinction to market priorities within the capitalist accumulation process failed, the opportunity was seized by the neo-conservatives. They wanted the sphere of the state to be closely circumscribed and limited to providing a forum for determining and administering the rules of market competition. But another group of proponents of post-social democratic ideas and politics shunned alike the blind worship of market competition and the uncritical trust in the administrative state, both of which according to them complemented each other and conduced to the fragmentation of social bonds.

The final factor, which according to Keane, created the contemporary legitimacy of the state—civil society relationship was the rise of new social movements.<sup>5</sup> These, deriving support from across class boundaries, relying upon grass-roots, informal and 'hidden' forms of organization, and steering clear of both the business as also the political world, questioned not only the distribution and legitimacy of macro-power relations but also challenged the deep-rooted rooted codes of social interaction within CS. Consisting normally of 'invisible' networks of small groups concealed under the layers of everyday life, shunning the goals of acquiring and transmuting political power, these movements broaden and deepen the division between state and civil society and generate new forms of solidarity that bring about pluralization of power relations within the latter.<sup>6</sup>

While before these developments CS had been relegated to cold oblivion in European political thought,<sup>7</sup> once it was re-legitimized in European social and political practices and retrieved in political theory, there was no stopping its panegyrists from searching for it in the marshy political systems of non-Western countries. As a discerning sociologist points out:

"It (CS) arose first in Greece and was elaborated in the Enlightenment, to characterize in a more favorable light one's own institutions (or society) in contrast to those others. The 'other' varied, but included both barbarians and despots. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries these 'uncivil' societies embraced past autocrats and present Orientals whose societies were thought to have been unable to develop in the manner of Western Europe. In the present period of post-Cold War adjustment 'civil society' carries, as earlier a heavy normative burden. It is what we in the West have and wish to see developed not only in Eastern Europe but in the East more generally. Like the associated notions of democracy and representation, of law and freedom, its absence in the East is seen as having impeded the earlier processes of modernization and even now as restricting the exercise of human rights"<sup>8</sup>

Now our objection against the search for the will-o'-the-wisp of CS in the admittedly different political systems of the Orient is, firstly, that the meaning of the term CS has changed to such transformative extents during the long career of the concept, that any nominalist search for this social formation elsewhere would be counterproductive. Rather the quest could be for autonomous sectors of social and economic action in diverse countries of the East. Any serious student of political science knows that from the time of Locke onwards CS periodically meant: a conceptual space and function separate from that of the State (Locke); a space for making cool money afforded by the 'fusion, combination and liaison' of different 'pouvoirs' and 'puissances' (Montesquieu); a 'societ'e naturelle' opposed to a 'societ'e politique' (Physiocrats); a 'polished society' strengthened by citizens' associations (Ferguson); a future society marked by social equality, civil liberties and limited constitutional governments (Paine); a separate moment of existence between the family and the state; a historically produced sphere of ethical life constituted by the market economy, social classes, corporations, and institutions centering round the administration of welfare, which were interdependent yet divisive, and therefore needed to be pedagogically organized by the state (Hegel); and an 'independent eye of society' comprising a plurality of interacting, self-organized and constantly vigilant civil associations that would protect liberty from welfarist state despotism (Tocqueville)<sup>9</sup>. Not only that subsequently CS was conceived in terms of Tonnies' opposition between the categories of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gessellschaft*,<sup>10</sup> but Cohen and Arato, two modern commentators on CS, sought for the seeds of CS in the writings of a 20th Century sociologist whose thought system seemed very far from and uncongenial to the concept, viz. Talcott Parsons. According to them the Parsonian concept of "societal community, that is distinguished from the economy, the polity and the cultural sphere, represents a synthesis of the liberal concept of civil society as differentiated from the state with the stress on social integration, solidarity, and community that typifies the sociological tradition initiated by Durkheim and Tonnies. this synthesis, in which both individuation and integration are central, involves, remarkably enough, a partial and conscious return to the Hegelian theory of civil society".<sup>11</sup> It is this communitarian reincarnation of CS that has helped new theorists to claim that 'social capital' (SC) a kind of instantiated set of communitarian norms, that has been existing from long before but has been hyped very recently, provides the underpinning of civil society which is more epiphenomenal.<sup>12</sup>

### **Functional Equivalent of CS in other Countries**

Since the meaning of CS underwent so many rupturings, there is no need to give it an essentialist definition. We can combine an 'etic' as well as an 'emic' understanding of it.<sup>13</sup> This was attempted by Goody when he analyzed some ancient travelogues and some authoritative modern sociological accounts, to

show that urban life in the cities of Hangzhou in the late 13th century, in the city of Hankow much later, and in the city of Ahmedabad in pre-colonial times raises, because of the civil aspects of their social life, the question of the existence of something like CS.<sup>14</sup> While we do not want to travel in the same direction, we are not averse to claiming that in India at least there were some mechanisms that protected the life of common people from the unmediated weight of political developments and there is no obstacle to describing them as civil social.

Discovering such institutions in pre-colonial India would be the proper task of historical sociology. Here, however, we are not attempting anything like it. Rather we are going to dig up a few indigenous social theories, in the fond hope that some day some zealous scholars would probe the deep recesses of India's social history to test the insights of these theorists. For the exploration of past Indian civil social institutions we would start from our analysis of an article by Partha Chatterjee on Tagore's views on possibilities of CS in colonial India. This is so because in our view Tagore is, apart from Gandhi, one social theorist who is truly original, the epithet and the accusation of 'derivative discourse' hardly applying to their socio-political thought.

### **Literary Societies in Colonial India: the Public, the Private and CS**

The subject of associational forms of colonial civil society in India has been made topical by a recent article of Chatterjee<sup>15</sup> where he has traced one of the beginnings of thinking on the possibilities of CS in colonial India to a literary controversy involving Rabindranath Tagore and another eminent nineteenth century Bengali poet, Nabin Chandra Sen.<sup>16</sup> But our humble submission is that the themes of this controversy, the issues raised by it, and their resolution do neither throw much light on Tagore's views on the history and politics of the much contested concept in pre-colonial and colonial India, nor do they agree with Tagore's later thinking. Rather the uses to which Tagore subsequently put another 'emic' category, concerned with adjustment processes within society, not only helps uncover Tagore's own politics and place him squarely in India's multifaceted freedom struggle, but assists us to test the worth of some social mechanisms of ancient India on the anvil of CS.

The controversy arose over a memorial meeting organized three weeks after the death of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, one of the foremost novelists, essayists, and satirists of 19th century Bengal, on April 8, 1894, which Sen, a younger contemporary of Bankim, in civil service as in literature was asked to preside over. Tagore was not very close to the organizers of the meeting, but was one of the main scheduled speakers. Sen had close personal relations with both Bankim and Tagore.<sup>17</sup> Sen, however, declined the invitation and the meeting was ultimately presided over by another person. The address delivered by Tagore in the meeting on the deceased novelist was published with suitable footnotes in a journal,<sup>18</sup> and was rated by a contemporary critic as a "bright

and perfect portrayal of Bankim's literary image". Chatterjee also says that the address "later went on to become something of a landmark essay in Bengali literary criticism".<sup>19</sup>

But the matter did not end in the innocuous literary sphere. While declining the invitation on the ground of the alienness of its subject Sen did not mind Tagore's feelings. As he himself later wrote in his autobiography he had spurned the invitation as public condolence meeting was outlandish for Hindus and was to be criticized for its artificiality.<sup>20</sup> Tagore, in his turn, wrote an irate piece in his said journal under the title "Śōksabhā" ("Condolence Meeting") where he defended the value of 'artificial social forms'<sup>21</sup> which according to Chatterjee had considerable bearing on civil society in India.<sup>22</sup>

After praising the socially constructive role of 'artificiality' and the need for it in social relations, Tagore in that article sought to identify its proper sphere. After admitting that artificiality had no place in the case of 'self-regarding'<sup>23</sup> feelings where external society had no access, and freedom reigned supreme in the hearts of men, Tagore showed, with greater insight than Mill, that human society is so complex that demarcating the domain which is one's own and that which belongs to external society very often becomes a Sisyphean task. So we are often compelled to leave a thoroughfare for what Tagore called the 'society-municipality' even through our own sphere of rights. To prove his point Tagore pointed to the universally recognized social rules even in such deeply intimate and personal matters as the expression of a son's grief at his father's death or the utterance of a devotee's feelings towards God. His argument was that by compelling its members to give vent to their most personal and a heartfelt feeling through its own mores, society has sought to simplify its work and has made such expression much more becoming.<sup>24</sup>

Tagore's defense of artificiality and stress on iconic grammar does not of course conform to many of his later views expressed in poems, essays, and stories etc.<sup>25</sup> and is essentially a minor point. What is more relevant is that while justifying the new forms of expressing mourning, Tagore had made his celebrated distinction between the 'public' and the 'private', through a series of steps. He began by showing that Indian society is a ('gārhasthyapradhān samāj') 'society dominated by households', where the strongest bonds rested on unstinted respect towards and dependence on parents and other authorities in the household. From this he argued that this is why the expression of grief at the loss of parents and superiors could not be left to personal inclinations of the son but had to be brought under social regulation. But he pointed to the new winds of change that had changed all this.

"But of late this household dominated society has undergone some transformations. A new tidal wave has swept into its precincts. Its name is the 'public'.

The thing is as new in its name as its substance. Translating it into Bengali is well nigh impossible. However the word 'public'

as also its antonym 'private' have gained wide currency in Bengali, though even now they have not become sufficiently respectable in literary gatherings...

Now that in our society the existence not only of households but also of a nascent 'public' has gradually been dominating our vision, it is inevitable that public responsibilities too emerge one by one".

The reason Tagore extolled this yet nascent public was its ability to perform the important task of expressing mourning condolence outside the narrow confines of family in a household dominated society. In short "to pay respects in public to men who had dedicated their lives....for the good of the public."<sup>26</sup>

Our proposition is simply not that Tagore's invocation of the 'public' in colonial India on the specific context of mourning the death of a deceased giant and in the more general context of literary societies, has deep Hegelian echoes, particularly when he hints at the need of the transcendence of Indian society from a 'gārhashtyapradhān samāj'<sup>27</sup>. Neither are we proposing a close reading of the similarities between Tagore and Tonnies, though Tagore's words that "the 'public' is new as the thing and as also its name" almost appears as a paraphrase of Tonnies' conviction that *Gesellschaft* or 'public life' is "new as a name as well as a phenomenon."<sup>28</sup> We do not dare controvert Chatterjee's astute observation that in proposing to 'educate' this 'adolescent public' "through public meetings as well as discussions therein", Tagore is only restating here the fundamental problematique of the nationalistic project of modernity under colonial conditions", the 'driving force' of which is a 'pedagogical mission'.<sup>29</sup> For in this article Tagore is lamenting in no uncertain terms the absence of literary societies in India, which in Europe acted as vehicles of 'sociation' and as fora where eminent persons put up appearances outside their households to perform educative functions. And Tagore's double critique of Indian society for its lack of dense sociation and the invisibility of women in "outer society"<sup>30</sup> gives more significance to his invocation of the 'public' than is afforded by the immediate context. But we are not prepared to go as far as Chatterjee to posit that Tagore's plea for such societies contains the open sesame to his conception of literary societies as components of modern colonial civil society.

Chatterjee sees in Tagore's plea for socially embedded literary societies in India "a new conception of personhood, where the private and the intimate are, as it were, always oriented towards a public" in a Habermasian way. As if Tagore is, in his view, "imagining for his country a world of literary activity embedded in a public sphere, constituted by a variety of civil social institutions, the sort of the world he himself had seen at first hand, when some fifteen years back he had lived in England for more than a year as a student".<sup>31</sup>

Now in spite of my awe for Chatterjee's tremendous scholarship I would

humbly posit that this analysis poses some problems, if we remember that its basis was two books written by Tagore, and if we briefly trace out their history. These two books are *Europe Prabāsīr Patra* (*Letters from Abroad in Europe*) and *Europe Jātrīr Diary* (*Diaries of a European Tourist*). Tagore first set out for England in his seventeenth year on 20 September 1878 and came back to Calcutta in the middle of March 1880. He wrote about his journey and his experiences in a series of letters contributed to the journal *Bharati* between April-May 1879 and July-August 1880, entitled 'Letters of a Europe-bound Bengali Youth' (*Europe Jatrī Kono Bangiya Jubaker Patra*), which was subsequently published in book form in 1881. After an abortive trip on 22 April 1881, he left for England once again on 22 August 1890 from Bombay and began his return journey on 9 October in the same year, to reach Bombay on 2 November. The diaries he kept during this short tour were brushed up and serially published in each issue of the first year of the journal *Sadhana* to be finally brought out as a two-volume book titled *Europe Jātrīr Diary*. The first volume, subtitled 'Introduction' had already been published in April 1891. The second was published in September 1893, less than one year before 'Shoksabha'.<sup>32</sup>

This brief historical sketch is revealing in more than one sense. First, the view of English social life as sketched in *Europe Prabāsīr Patra* was none too eulogistic. And this view did not change for the better in the second book. A few letters of the first not only shows the poet's frustration at not seeing in English society the intellectually vibrant place he had thought it idealistically to be; his detestation for the triviality of English social life and the domination of old maids or spinsters in it; more importantly his repugnance to the voice of politics in this social life; but also his tendency to trivialize meetings of temperance societies, working men's societies etc. for the same preponderance of old maids who in young Tagore's opinion visited these places for having little else to do.<sup>33</sup> While in the first book he grudgingly admits that "some benefits may also perhaps accrue from it"<sup>34</sup> in the second even this politeness of concession is missing.

To make this point clearer we have to point out that Tagore's negative perceptions of English social life actually worsened in the later book. Since the first volume of this book was subsequently split by Tagore himself into two essays, spread over two separate books in two volumes of RR—"Nūtan o Purātan" ("The New and the Old") in *Swadeś* (*Homeland*) and in "Prācyā and Pratīcyā" ("The East and the West") in *Samāj* (*Society*)<sup>35</sup>—we shall refer to them for his harsher views regarding English society. There he compares the lot of these spinsters very unfavourably with even that of the child widows of India. The latter have at least human children to bring up in the "our populous, closely knit but cordial households".<sup>36</sup> The former could only afford "rearing puppies" and "holding and supporting public meetings". The young poet was at his ungracious worst when he says, "just as the accumulated milk

of the mother of a stillborn child has to be drained out by artificial means for her health, so the affections accumulated in the womanly heart of a spinster have to be spent out through various ruses..."<sup>37</sup>

So much for young Tagore's supposed adulation for the public sphere in English social life. Then how to explain this sudden change of heart in "Śoksabhā"? did Tagore not have such literary societies in his native Calcutta? If the answer is yes, then why does he bring in the theme of the 'public' to justify them? Ever since he was a child of fourteen Tagore was abreast of and connected with many such societies like the 'Vidvajjanasamagam', (Society of the Learned), 'Sāraswat Samāj' ('Academic Society'), 'Bethune Society', 'Sāvitrī Sabhā', Caitanya Library, Beadon Square Literary Club etc. Some of them had either had his fourth elder brother or himself as either founder or patron. Bankim was the first president of the 'Sāraswat Samāj'. The joint organizers of the contentious condolence meeting, Chaitanya Library and the Beadon Square Literary Club, actually provided the venue where he read the 'Introduction' of *Europe Jātrīr Diary*.<sup>38</sup> All this before the famous Tagore-Sen debate over mourning in public. This brings us back to square one. What made Tagore so touchy and fussy about literary societies at the time of this controversy?

Our contention is that both the strong objection of Sen to preside over the meeting and the irate reaction of Tagore to it were not because of Sen's fixed and Tagore's changeable opinions on the subject of literary societies. Rather the incident became the flashpoint of the tension in their relationship that had been simmering for quite some time beneath a veneer of civility.<sup>39</sup> Actually Sen remembered the tension long after the controversy had died down, even after fifteen years.<sup>40</sup> And a mature Tagore had outgrown his zeal for literary societies as embodiments of a civil social 'public'. So much so that in another travelogue, written long after the *Patra* and the *Diary*, he deplored the fact that "these days in the audience of literature the common masses ('sarvasādhāraṇa') are seated on the royal throne. It is impossible to sit down to write wholly ignoring this truth." Tagore made a clever distinction between them, alternatively called the 'present public' and 'mānabsādhāraṇa' ('whole humanity'), a collective human tradition which was to be the real judge of the worth of timeless literature. His argument was that had Kalidasa's *Meghadūtam* been written in the backdrop of a close interactive relationship between a great literary figure and his 'reading public', then "just as this group would have been defunct Meghadūt would have met its demise with it"<sup>41</sup>

Tagore's lost love for the 'public' at least as embodied in literary societies would be clearer from the words below:

"What we call by the name of 'public' was not present during Kalidasa's time, huddling together as an audience. Had it been so, it would have blocked the way to a great extent the way of the general humankind that has arrived on the great stage created by centuries past." As he makes his meaning further



clear, "The public of nowadays is really the congealed masses of a specific time period. Solidified in it is the politics, social practices, religious codes, special tastes and so many other things of present times...its requirements would not tally those of a hundred years later." Tagore is not now even prepared to grant it the rights of praising and disapproving of literary creations. "For while this great public (public mahārājā) rejects something today with red eyes, tomorrow it makes use of that in such a vocal way that it seems that it had been thinking on this line from time immemorial." Just a little later Tagore utters his supreme aristocratic disdain for this 'public' through an analysis of its plebian and bourgeois (at least in the old sense) origins: "When the city of Calcutta suddenly raised its head around the offices and warehouses of English 'baniahs' (tradespeople), a new type of the 'public' emerged in the newly built shopping streets of the city. The image of at least a section of it has found a place in the pages of 'Hutum Panchār Nakśa' (Burlesque of a Great Horned Owl). The imprint of its prescriptions is found in the popular poems ('pāñchālī') of Daśu Roy." Tagore puts a question directly, "Would we have to recognize this public of the market ('hāt') *created by the East India Company*, as the representatives of the general humanity just because of its numerical preponderance, *even though it lacked the ability of enjoying the literary fruits of leisure through the education attained through leisure*? In actuality it was this 'public' which had hindered Daśu Roy's talents from reaching the world-historical stage of the universal mankind."<sup>42</sup>

These last words, particularly the underlined ones, prove many things. First, the word 'public' was not too dear to Tagore generally, or even in the specific sense of author-reader interaction, in spite of the fuss about them in "Śoksabhā". But, secondly, it might also mean that in the later set of quotations Tagore's adverse reaction was not to the kind of 'public' he was seeking in that essay, but to a motley Calcutta crowd of lowly origins. Comparing Bankim's and Tagore's literary styles Kaviraj has in a very original and provocative book<sup>43</sup> pointed to the short shrift given by the latter to the lower orders in "the fictive and social world" depicted by him, that he does not find in Bankim's multidimensional prose. According to him while Bankim's aesthetic theory "uses the historical availability of several traditions of fashion a creative synthesis, rather than *an impoverished westernized solution*", Tagore's language and style highlight a far more 'restrictive format'. As Kaviraj even more insightfully adds, "In the culture of Tagore, for instance, the high classical tone derived from Indian influences mix easily with the high western aesthetic in a self-conscious and deliberate theoretical construct. But the element of the popular, the carnivalesque, and the market like is missing. Of course in a certain way, the later culture is more refined and cultivated, but it contains an erasure, which is worth analyzing."<sup>44</sup>

This psycho-literary analysis would help us in understanding why Tagore could accept a public from the classical Sanskrit period of India's cultural

history, as well as a public from the ethereal and idealized western world of literature, but not a public from the subaltern Calcutta of his times. The public that he was talking about in “Śoksabhā” was a reified entity, a theoretical construct, unpeopled nad sanitized of all material and unwelcome empirical referents. The point here is that many people in colonial Calcutta were thinking that such associations consisting of peers, cronies and sycophants would serve as civil social institutions. But Tagore himself was in the meantime eyeing something else that would serve as an alternative.

### **Societalism and Societal Governance**

for many nationalist thinkers, social reformers, liberal politicians and activists the colonial state presented a great problem. Minimalist, essentially law-enforcing, unrepresentative and unreponsive, the colonialist state was to be the object of resistance. But those who did not dare take this path, or did not at least consider this a viable alternative, sought refuge in a kind of autonomy of the naïve society from the alien state. There were many adherents of this view. But Tagore achieved the perfection of utterance for this position.

In many of his essays Tagore used words like ‘samajtantra’, ‘samajshakti’ etc., the proper English words for which would be ‘societalism’, and social power. for example, as he says in an article summarizing his own political thought:

“From time immemorial, both in India and in China ‘societalism’ has been dominant, ‘statism’ being subordinate to it. The country has properly defended itself through the combined might of the society. It is our society which has organized its system of education, provided water to the thirsty, food to the hungry and temples to the worshipper, *has meted out justice to the offender and facilitated respect for the honourable*: it has thus preserved the character of the land and its numerous villages and made its splendour permanent. ingdoms and empires rose and fell over the land of the country, realms changed hands among native kings, foreign kings came scrambling for the throne—plundering and oppression also were also not infrequent—but still the integrity of the country was not preserved, as it performed its tasks itself..In this way they country belonged to the whole populace of the land, the king ws ensconced in only one small part of it, just like the diadem rests on the head. In a state-centric country the soul of the land remains particularly circumscribed in its ‘statism’; but in a society-centric land the life of the country is immanence all over its expanse. In a state-centric country fall of state power leads to its decline. It dies just of this. This is the way Greece and Rome thave collapsed. But (countries like) China and India have defended their integrity over a very long time through numerous

political changes—its reason is that its soul remains extended throughout the ubiquitous society.”<sup>45</sup>

The vast array of functions accorded to society in the last quote would seem to make Tagore nearly Comtean. But in spite of this conceptual misadventure of retaining even the policing functions needed in a social system with society itself, Tagore is generally emphatic about the existence of a society autonomous and independent of the state, and self-sustaining too, through the history of Indian culture. And here he is more Lockean than Comtean, in his demarcation of the conceptual functions of the society and the state, and the moral principles which govern this demarcation. As he says:

“In our country the functions of conducting war, defending the country and administering justice have been performed by the king; but all other functions ranging from imparting education to providing water have been so smoothly performed by society that over so many centuries reigns of numerous new kings flowed over our country like floodwaters. Yet these could not turn us into brutes by destroying our religion, neither could these make us rootless by devastating our society. There has been no lull in battle between kings—yet in the arbours among our murmuring bamboo-groves, in the cool shade of our mango or jackfruit trees temples have been coming up; shelters for guests have been building; ponds have been digging; teachers have been teaching arithmetic formulae of Shubhankar; lecturing on scriptures at informal schools has not stopped; Ramayana has been continued to be recited in the permanent structures for the worship of goddess Durga; and the precincts of the villages have resounded with the sound of devotional songs of ‘kirtana’. Society has not waited for support from the outside and has not lost its grace because of external disturbances.”<sup>46</sup>

True to this tradition, Tagore wanted the autonomous society in the villages to supply natural needs of the people, if not the artificial needs created by the western civilization.<sup>47</sup> Remembering that *Swadeshi Samaj* was written in the background of the comments of the colonial government on ways of redressing the water scarcity in Bengal,<sup>48</sup> he very inexplicably adjudged intervention of the state utterly unnecessary and undesirable. To show why society should not have waited for or depended upon the state or government to fill the void in our essential social services, he stood the westerners’ contention about the absence of CS in the south on its head. In Tagore’s view ‘what in English is called the ‘state’ is termed in modern parlance in our country as ‘government’. In ancient India this ‘government’ was present in the form of ‘royal power’. But there is a difference between the ‘state’ in England and ‘royal power’ in our country. England entrusted the entire burden of welfare functions to the state—India had only partly done it.” Tagore also brings here

the effects of these systemic differences for individual responsibilities in India and England. "In England every person is independent in pursuing his or her pleasures and interests.—For all their major responsibilities are entrusted to royal power. But in our country it is royal power which is relatively independent—subjects in general are bound by social obligations. The king may go to war, may go a hunting, may discharge royal duties or spend his day in pleasure, for all that he will remain answerable only to religion—but the general masses do not remain totally dependent on him for their good—the tasks of society remain wonderfully and diversely divided among each and every member of society."

In Tagore's opinion these two types of equilibrium in the west and the east have influenced the nature and importance of politics in the two worlds. "In England once royal power is disrupted the entire country is faced with destruction, which is why politics is such an important thing in Europe (England). In our country if society is crippled a crisis situation arises. It is for this reason that we have not staked our life on political independence, but have by all means protected our social freedom..."<sup>49</sup>

### Colonial State and Civil Society

So with some such arguments Tagore seeks to regenerate 'ātmaśakti' or self-reliance in Indian society based on India's 'dharmabyabasthā' or consensual social and moral code of conduct; and wants to keep the state uninvolved in the provision of social services. His additional argument is that the state in Europe-America is based integrally on the consent of the whole society. "Only through arguments we cannot secure it here." This is because in our country the government is not one of society, but is located outside society.<sup>50</sup> Unlike western theorists talking about the state-civil society distinction in the same land, Tagore was trying to pit the traditional, native society of India against the alien and unresponsive British colonial state. and for the first time he was mingling the discourse on colonialism with the discourse on state—civil relationship.

But the prevarications on the question of India's independence that we find in Tagore's books of essay like *Rājā-Prajā (King and Subjects)* and *Samūha (Collection)*, his convoluted support for English monarchy for India in place of the then rule of ambitious bureaucrats and exploitation by one whole nation,<sup>51</sup> made his plea of societalism somewhat suspect. A noted Tagore expert aptly point out that "Rabindranath's conception of the 'swadeśī samāj' (indigenous community) is closely akin to 'parallel government', a non-antagonistic domain of freedom." In justification of it he says: "In that great moment of the 'swadeśī' movement, the poet wanted to touch the nodal point of the country's strength from self-hood." But shortly afterwards he begins his demolition of Tagore's idea of national self-hood by indicating that while seeking to inspire the self strengthening of the country and establishing the idea of

a parallel government, the poet was downgrading and soft-pedaling the context of the country's dependence, and the question of its political freedom.<sup>52</sup>

However, hard-hitting these words, their veracity would seem to be borne out by Tagore's curious words in an essay that after hundred and fifty years of British rule have gone by, "there is no gain in arguing if this rule has benefited us or not. for this argument would neither wipe away our past, nor would it remedy our present grievances."<sup>53</sup> Elsewhere he makes the question of India's dependence even more clearly unimportant: "Instead of wasting ur time in prating over whether the English people or somebody else is our king, we should try to possess it [India] through our service."<sup>54</sup>

These words raise more problems than they solve. As Roy so incisively comments, "Rabindranath wanted the invocation of India's self strengthening almost ignoring the state apparatus of European variety that was placed at the apex of the British Indian Empire. Was this possible? Just because 'societalism' was ascendant in India, the imperial power could not be expected to idly watch its invocation and consequent rise. It is simply an idea. It surely has a positive side, and that is only as a force complementary to our statist endeavours. It never is nor was it ever possible to dispense with the latter."<sup>55</sup>

Such a non-antagonistic civil society vis-à-vis an oppressive colonial state was not only the lonely wanderings of a poet's romantic fancy. At this time Prafulla Chandra Roy, Nilratan Sircar, Satishchandra Mukherjee, Aswini Kumar Datta etc., embraced some such vision of constructive work in the villages, through a revival of the traditional 'samaj' or community. Aurobindo in a series of articles in *Bande Mataram* in April 1907 perhaps rightly ridiculed them as "peaceful, ashrams and swadeshism and self-help".<sup>56</sup> Basically the objections of Aurobindo and some others were that an unhistoricized conception of a community dating back to India's ancient past was being sought to be imposed on India's bloodied colonial reality.<sup>57</sup> True, the social Whiggery and the political Toryism implicit in the political thought of Tagore and his ilk<sup>58</sup> might have had its problems. But the neglect of building of an autonomous society through communitarian values, that this neglect of this strand of thought entailed, made the post independence reality of an oppressive, hyper-rationalist, hypertrophied state a veritable sociological monstrosity. This has made the search for civil social institutions in postcolonial India a pressing social scientific endeavour.

### **What Could the Search for Civil Social Institutions in Contemporary India Learn From the Poet**

The recent growth of interest in CS, in countries in the South, like India, has been caused by the disaffection against the postcolonial state. Sociologists like Dipankar Gupta feel that in the backdrop of the failed or unfulfilled promises for the last five decades the Indian State suffers from a crisis of legitimacy. This is because in utter disregard of pressing demands from the majority of

the citizenry, the Indian state has remained content with aggrandizing itself and its functionaries in the guise of a democracy that it at best pays lip service to. In consequence two different types of demand have confronted it: (i) harking back to a nostalgic past where communal structures purveying people's need sabounded; and (ii) strengthening intermediae associations that have the power and ability to facilitate the development of constitutional democracy.<sup>59</sup>

The first course would seem odd and problematic to a great many political theorists, including Kaviraj himself.<sup>60</sup> This because one of the three moments of development through which the concept of CS crystallized, one was between community (*Gemeinschaft*) and society (*Gessellschaft*). But as we have pointed out in the introduction, Cohen and Arato have much reduced the strength of this dichotomy by discovering the seeds of a CS in Parson's concept of the 'societal community'. And they are besides emphatic that the idea of CS could also be developed in favour of claims for the 'welfare state' against 'neoconservative antistatism', for participation against representation, and for democratically inclined communitarianism against rights-based liberalism. It is their unequivocal "thesis that the tensions between rights-based liberalism and, at least democratically oriented communitarianism can be considerably diminished if not entirely overcome on the basis of a new theory of civil society."<sup>61</sup>

It is possibly in this sense that Kothari speaks of civil society in India. While he readily admits that the "Civil society's ordering of politics and governance is in my view the take off point of human governance, such a reentry is what contemporary social movements strive for.... The diverse marginalized peoples who have been excluded by the militarized, market life of the State become the source for the creation of norms by which the State should be governed."<sup>62</sup> Of course these norms would not give wide berth to communitarian norms and values. This belief may gain its legitimacy from the fact that while speaking in favour of a "direct and dynamic role of mass politics of the grassroots variety", Kothari counsels us on why the western model of democratic politics would not suit us:

"In a predominantly rural society with great diversity, party formations like the various social democratic parties or labour parties that emerged in Western Europe and heralded the dawn of a mass age are not likely to emerge. We also know that without such formations and the pressure they generated, the phenomenon of the modern welfare state also would not have taken place. So on both these counts - the role of parties on the one hand and of the state on the other — we have to tink wholly afresh, for ourselves, and transcending all that we imported which we had to, to begin with. And as we do this we will see that there is no alternative from moving towards a pluralist, decentralized polity.... and a self reliant economy, self reliant for the people and not just

for the State...in our kind of a context a just society cannot be built except by the people coming into their own and assuming responsibilities for shaping their lives.”<sup>63</sup>

It would bear repetition that the same message of communal self-strengthening had been preached by Tagore, and so long as these movements provide domains where the oppressiveness of the State can be resisted, there is no matter if the formations are communitarian or individualistic. Actually in Kaviraj's view in the context of the Third World two altogether different things can be signified by civil society; (i) “all social organizations apart from the State—Which include not merely those based on *gesellschaftlich* principles, but also those of *Gemeinschaft*”; (ii) alternatively there can be a more cautious and restrictive use of the term which admits only the proper sort of organizations, namely the *gesellschaft* ones.”<sup>64</sup>

Now, Kaviraj had objections to accepting some organizations of colonial Calcutta as CS. And that was not because of their *gemeinschaftlich* character, but on account of the fact that “large masses of the peasantry and country-dwellers were untouched by these activities”<sup>65</sup>. It is no matter either that the same objections would touch the Kolkata ‘*śuśīl samāj*’, the recruiting base of which is almost as narrow as the hybrid colonial outfits in Tagore's Calcutta. But if self-help groups, autonomous feminist groups and sundry other groups can overcome this deficiency, even at the cost of losing some of the breeding of the former, there cannot be any obstacle to calling them civil social. This may remove any doubt about Tagore's worth as a social theorist. On the debit side he did not fully see the limits of the colonial civil society. As a South Asian scholar so aptly remarks:

“Anomalies arising from the coexistence of rationalistic colonial laws and the customs of Indian society afforded some limited scope for a subject people denied individual rights of citizenship to avoid the legal domain and instead seek redress within an attenuating arena of communitarian self expression. The steady advance over time of a public sphere defined in colonial terms eroded, though never eliminated, the social space which could nurture the reciprocal rights and responsibilities that had characterized pre-colonial community.”<sup>66</sup>

But more importantly he could show us the futility of searching for the civil social only among open and secular institutions like universities, colleges, hospitals, municipal corporations, political parties, banks, chambers of commerce, NGOs etc. Few of these comprehensively touch the lives of the billion of our compatriots, even amidst the claims of deepening democracy. An ‘emic’ understanding of the concept, combined with a ‘etic’ one, would sensitize us to a greater extent to the social possibilities of an India that is just unfolding in its myriad unorganized and informal niches in tribal, rural, marginal and peripheral settings, and is trying to catch on their Protean political

forms, many of which would not be 'civil society', but, all the same, civil social.

### Notes and References

1. See, for example, Craig Calhoun, "Civil Society and the Public Sphere", *Public Culture*, 5(1993): 267-70.
2. Fukuyama's article, "The End of History"; it first appeared in 1989 with breathtaking timeliness, before being expanded into book form three years later. See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992).
3. See "Postcolonial History and the 'Post-'Condition", *Socialist Register*, 1997, pp. 353-81.
4. See John Keane, 'Introduction', in (ed.) John Keane, *Civil Society and the State: New European Perspectives* (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 2-13.
5. For the nature of these movements and their civil social significance see A. Touraine, *The Voice and the Eye: An Analysis of Social Movements* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
6. Ibid.
7. According to some scholars the concept of CS, appearing at the end of the 18th century, enjoyed thereafter a brief but spectacular career in Europe until the second half of the 19th century, till it was relegated later to cold oblivion. This is why it played no structural role in the arguments during the 1950s of liberal political theorists like Isaiah Berlin, Jacob Talmon or Karl Popper, though all of them sought to defend liberal values and individual liberty and were concerned to demarcate the proper sphere and limits of political authority. During the same period both critics of the left and Marxists gave the concept short shrift, as did the members of the Frankfurt School and critics of left totalitarianism like Herbert Marcuse. Cf. Sunil Khilnani, "The Development of Civil Society", in (eds.) Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilani, *Civil Society: History and Possibilities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 11-32, especially pp. 15-16.
8. J. R. Goody, "Civil Society in an Extra-European Perspective", in Kaviraj and Khilnani, *Civil Society*, p. 149.
9. See Kaviraj, "In Search of Civil Society" in *ibid*, pp. 287-300; John Keane, *Civil Society and the State*, pp. 35-70; Neera Chandhoke, *State and Civil Society: Explorations in Political Theory* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, (1995), 114-34.
10. See Ferdinand Tonnies, *Community and Society* (1887), translated and introduced by Charles P. Loomis (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1957), pp. 33-40, reprinted in J.H. Abraham, *Origins and Growth of Sociology* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1973) pp. 244-46; Kaviraj, 'In Search of Civil Society', pp. 303-306.
11. Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato make this conceptual discovery in Parsons' *The System of Modern Societies* (1971), See Cohen and Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 117-42.



12. For the concept of SC and its relevance for and supposedly close connection with CS, see James C. Coleman, "Social Capital", in Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 300-21; Coleman, 'Norms as Social Capital' in (eds.) Gerard Radnitzky and Peter Bernholz, *Economic Imperialism: The Economic Approach Outside the Field of Economics* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1987), pp. 133-53; Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Tradition in Modern Italy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 1-16, 63-185; Francis Fukuyama, 'Social Capital, Civil Society and Development', *Third World Quarterly*, 22:1 (2001): 7-20.
13. 'Etic' is an abbreviation of 'Phonetic'. Culled from cultural studies, sociolinguistics, anthropology etc. the adj. relates to making use of pre-established categories for organizing and interpreting anthropological data rather than using categories recognized within the culture being studied. The adj. 'emic' also abbreviated from phonemic relates to the analysis of structural elements of language and behaviour using categories of the people studied. See *Encarta: World English Dictionary* (Chennai: Macmillan. 1999), pp. 615, and 643.
14. See Goody, 'Civil Society', pp. 152-61.
15. Partha Chatterjee, "On Civil and Political Society in Postcolonial Democracies" in Kaviraj and Khilnani, *Civil Society*, pp. 165-78 (hereinafter "Postcolonial Civil Society").
16. Sen's was the last name in a famous literary quartet 'Hem-Madhu-Bankim-Nabin', the first standing for poet Hem chandra Bandyopadhyay, the second for Michael Madhusudan Dutt. Sen wrote a few extremely popular books of long verses, most of which are mostly period-pieces, of interest mainly to students of Bengali literature.
17. See Prasanta Kumar Pal, *Ravijivānī (Life of Tagore)*, the most inclusive and authentic biography of Tagore, vol. 3 (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers Private Limited, 1987), pp. 169-70 (hereinafter Pal, *Ravijivānī*). The reference to volume no. and page no. would be as iii, 169-70.
18. Pal, *Ravijivānī*, iv, 2-3.
19. Chatterjee, "Postcolonial civil Society", p. 165.
20. See Nabin Chandra Sen, *Āmar Jīvan, (My Life)*, vol v., in *Navīnchandra Racanavalī*, vol.2, (eds.) Santikumar Dasgupta and Haribandhu Mukhati (Kolkata: Dattachoudhuri, 1976), p. 253; Pal, *Ravijivānī*, iv, 2.
21. Rabindranath Tagore, *Ravīndra Racanavalī (Collected Works of Tagore)*, cheap edition on the occasion of Tagore's 125th birth anniversary (Kolkata: Viswabharati, 1986-1991), vol. 5, p. 613, hereinafter references as RR, v, 613.
22. Chatterjee, "Postcolonial Civil Society", p. 166.
23. I have deliberately used John Stuart Mill's expression for the subsequent words of Tagore regarding the difficulty of delimiting one's personal and external societal domains, as Tagore's words effectively echo the critics' point that Mill's distinction between 'self-regarding' and 'other-regarding' activities in the context of the domain of liberty does not bear scrutiny. See John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, in *Utilitarianism, Liberty, Representative Government*, with an introduction by

- A.D. Lindsay, Everyman's Library 482 (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1962), pp. 73-75.
24. Tagore, "Śoksabhā", *RR*, V, 613-14.
  25. See for example Tagore's impassioned plea for personal, non-grammatological religion in verse 15, 'Patraput', *RR*, x, 126-31, written full forty years after "Condolence Meeting" was written in April-May 1894.
  26. "Śoksabhā", *RR*, v, 614-15.
  27. See chandhoke, *Civil Society*, pp. 114-34.
  28. See endnote 10 above.
  29. Chatterjee, "Postcolonial Civil Society", pp. 168.
  30. "Śoksabhā" p. 615.
  31. Chatterjee, "Postcolonial Civil Society", p. 168-69.
  32. Pal, *Ravijīvanī*, ii, 14-15, 43-46, 99-100, and 120-22; iii. 150-52, 159-61, and 167-68.
  33. "Second Letter", *Europe Prabāsīr Patra*, *RR*, i, 803-04, 818.
  34. *Ibid*, 804.
  35. Pal, *RR*, vi, 499-508, 538-47; *RR*, iii, 177.
  36. *RR*, VI, 540-41.
  37. *Ibid*.
  38. Pal, *Ravijīvanī*, i, 200-01, 217-18; *Ravijīvanī*, ii, 91-92, 98-9, 132-3, 152-3; *Ravijīvanī*, iii, 70-1, 169-71.
  39. For the genesis of the tension in their relationship and its later development see Sen, *Āmar Jīvan*, vol. 4 in *Navīnchandra Racanavalī*, Vol 3 (Kolkata Sahitya Parishat, 159), pp. 58-59, quoted in Pal, *Ravijīvanī*, i, 239-41, 253; *Jivansmriti (Reminiscences)*, *RR*, ix, 463.
  40. *RR*, iv. 25n, *Āmar Jīvan*, vol. 5, 253.
  41. Letter no. 4, in *Jāvā Jātrīr Patra*, *RR*, x, 508-10.
  42. *Ibid*.
  43. See Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and the Formation of nationalist Discourse in India*, Paperback edition, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).
  44. *Ibid*, pp. 8, 2.67, and 69.
  45. Tagore, 'Ravīndranather Rāshtranaitik Mat' (1336) ('Ravīndranath's Political Views') sequel to *Kālāntar*, *RR*, xii, 664.
  46. "Swadeśī Samāj", ("Native Society"), In *Ātmasakti*, *RR*, ii, 626.
  47. *Ibid*.
  48. *Ibid*, p. 625.
  49. *Ibid*, pp. 626-27.
  50. *Ibid*, pp. 627-28.
  51. See for example essays "Path o Pātheya" "Ingraj o Bhāratbasī", "Rajnītir

- Dwidhā”, “Apamāner ratikār”, “Bahurājakatā”, and “Rājbhakti” in *Raja-Praja*, in *RR*, vol. v, 629-32, 638-39, 642, 657-59, 662-63, and 668-69.
52. See Jibendu Roy, *Ravindra nather Bharatbarsha (Ravindra nath's India)* (Kolkata: Sahityasri, 1986), pp.25-41, specially pp. 25, 27, 30.
53. “Swādhikārapramattah”, *Kālāntar*, *RR*, xii, 632.
54. “Tagore’s Political Views”, *RR*, 664.
55. Roy, *Ravindranather Bharatbarsha*, p.97.
56. Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India* (Madras: Macmillan Indian Limited, 1985), pp. 112-14.
57. See articles by associates of Aurobindo, Shyamsundar Chakravarty, Hemendra Prasad Ghosh, Bijoy Chattopadhyay etc. in issues of *Bande Mataram* like “Mediaeval Abstraction and modern Problem in India” (27 May), “Patriotic Reform and National Ideals” (29 May), “Babu Ravindra nath Tagore on the Present Situation” (30 May) and “Ravindra nath Tagore on the Present Situation” (1 June, 1908), Cited in Pal, *Ravijīvanī*, vi. 7.
58. I have borrowed the concepts, as applied to the Indian situation, from Stanley Wolpert, who considers Gokhale a social Whig and a political Tory, and Tilak just the reverse. See Wolpert, *Tilak and Gokhale: Revolution and Reform in the Making of Modern India* (Delhi: Surjeet Publications, 1982). Tagore was if anything closest to Gokhale’s brand of politics.
59. See Dipankar Gupta *Culture, Space and the Nation State* (New Delhi: Sage Publishers, 2000), p. 160.
60. See Kaviraj, ‘In Search of Civil Society’, pp. 310-12.
61. Cohen and Arato, *Civil Society*, pp. 4-15, and 20.
62. Rajni Kothari, *State against Democracy: In Search of Humane Governance* (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1988), p. 3.
63. *Ibid*, 70.
64. Kaviraj, ‘In Search of Civil Society’, p. 319.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 311.
66. Ayesha Jalal, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia: A Comparative and Historical Perspective* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 10-11.

# EVALUATING 'KALYAN' AND COMMUNITY RADIO POLICY IN INDIA: IMAGES OF ALTERNATE EMPOWERMENT FROM GRAM BANGLA?<sup>1</sup>

Bonita Aleaz

"...when women are main players in communication and not simply a pretty voice; when no type of dictatorship is tolerated...that is community radio" (Jose Ignacio Lopez, author of *Rebel Radio: The story of El Salvador's Radio Venceremos*, 1977)

Efforts to 'empower' the marginalized sections of the country have taken well known at the same time circuitous routes. The popular notion that the use of electronic media for developmental purposes is a corollary of the recent hype surrounding the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in India is erroneous. The use of radio and television for developmental purposes actually has a much longer history in the country. The recent digital revolution has merely signified the need for the use of the medium to revolutionize access to deprived groups and communities throughout the length and breadth of the land. In other words, the comprehensive use of airwaves was deemed an essential component of the entire 'revamping' of governance-related issues in the country. The process can be linked to the efforts manifested in 1975-76 itself, when the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) had started out with the same motives but subsequently it was revealed that radio is the cheapest means of 'communication' with communities that often have a subsistence level existence. This approach to development was given added vigour around the time when the state had to furbish face-saving efforts tremendously in order to wipe off the stigma of deprecating reports such as the *Status of Women in India Report*. However, despite the periodic manifestations of busyness, at the state level, the 'elusive' empowerment of the underprivileged, particularly the women, which was the original objective, seems to be yet a far cry. It was here that the grass roots level 'community radio' proved far more useful in eliciting the 'elusive voices' of the people. The article enters into this method of empowerment and explores the effects of at least one programmed effort to privilege the underprivileged through the use of broadcasts.

The article has three components: it briefly looks at the growth of broadcast policy (draft policy, 2007) in India. Next it looks at some of the literature highlighting the use of radio in various contexts to give voice to the marginalized; and finally evaluates the information collected on the programme

---

Dr. Aleaz is Professor in the Department of Political Science, University of Calcutta, Kolkata.

run by the University of Kalyani, Institute of Film and Mass Communication, under the epithet 'Kalyani'. The questions raised relate to the nature of the programme; the extent it conformed to the appellation of a community radio; what was really conveyed, and finally the nature of responses obtained, specifically from the women. What kind of 'empowerment' did the emerging voices really indicate? In this process information on other popular programmes, such as the Kutchi radio programme and Jharkhand broadcast initiatives for women are also given by way of comparison.

*Empowerment* here is not seen as a measurable category or even a visible category.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the objective is to evaluate the change if any, reflected *in the voices of those* who became the targets of a radio programme launched as a part of the process to effect change through an entertainment cum educative programme. The Institute of Mass Communication Film and Television Studies (IMCFTS) Kolkata, affiliated to Kalyani University, was registered under the West Bengal Government as a non-profit organization to impart vocational courses in the field of media. The courses offered include Mass Communication, Journalism, Public Relation, Advertising, Audio-Visual Communication and the other allied subjects related to media studies. The University in technical collaboration with the Institute started to broadcast an education based infotainment program through All India Radio, Kolkata-A (Prime Channel) covering 14 Districts of West Bengal. The contract between AIR and University of Kalyani was signed and a Memorandum of Agreement between the University and the Institute executed for the same. By the virtue of the Agreement the Institute was to produce and market all the programmes on-behalf of the University for the broadcast. To all intents its programme confirmed the hitherto existing policies relating to use of airwaves of the Government of India. Its purpose was to benefit the rural masses, through the educative content imparted and eventually function as a community radio. What eventually transpired is both informative and interesting to analyze. The process unfolds the variegated facets of 'empowerment' as a resultant of enabling pro-people governance policies.

## I

Civil society groups in India had been lobbying for changes in broadcasting policy in keeping with the trend visible the world over to create spaces for the agendas of the marginalized. However, the hierarchical and paternalistic 'public' and profit-oriented commercial models have dominated the media in the country for the last eighty years. Little had been done to promote autonomous, decentralized and reciprocal broadcasting practices, the radio to all intents reinforced existing economic and geopolitical hierarchies by limiting access to viewers. Privatization of ownership merely escalated this pre-existing phenomenon. The possibility of a change towards democratic communication from the grassroots point of view is only now emerging, after years of

bureaucratic apathy (Pavrala and Malik: 243). That women's voices should be specifically highlighted was visible in a number of research reports appearing worldwide.

"Working to bringing the voices of marginalized women into social policies and debates" was the name of the paper produced by Jo Anne Lee and Lise Martin of the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women. their Report of June 2006 underlined a number of approaches, much of which had direct bearing on the policy applicable for broadcasting and had been influential in the case of formulating the Government of India's policy as well.

Some of the suggestions underlined by them were: - linkages between *community* and *university* based research in which, overcoming the social exclusion of women was to be the prime focus. To use the media to impart social and economic justice, and to overcome poverty; this should finally lead to the inclusion of women's *voices* leading to the change of policy itself; towards this end voices from the audience would have to be prioritized and target audiences selected.

After independence, the AIR has embarked upon what is called a Reithean Legacy, (coined after Lord Reith, who was obsessed with the top-down approach in policy making). To 'inform, educate and entertain'- was the modality of 'benefiting' the masses in the perspective of '*Bahujan Hitaye: Bahujan Sukhaya*' or the benefit and happiness of large sections of the people.<sup>3</sup> It was a comprehensive policy not intended for community 'voices' but national development and integration. The first review was undertaken in 1964 under the Chairmanship of Asok Chanda. On the basis of the latter's report in 1966, radio stations were to expand to state capitals and border areas, including linguistic regions. However, it was not until 1977 that the first Frequency Modulated (FM) service started and the first local station emerged only in 1984. Yet, the culture of compliance prevailed, and critique was not tolerated. It did not matter who the listeners' were since their responses were never ascertained. Programmes for the ruralites were dry, and there was not much feedback on these. Television had already gained popularity and subsequently TV and AIR were separated in 1976, it was perceived that the perspectives of the two media were different.

The Emergency and rampant abuse of the media propelled a *White Paper on the misuse of the mass media*. Since then there have been sporadic pronouncements for genuine autonomy, and adequate provisions for feedback and spontaneous expressions by the listeners. *Akash Bharati* in 1977 proposed a 'dialogue with the people' and thrust towards 'participative government'. The 1980's witnessed a spate of directives from the government in the form of policy guidelines. The question of autonomy was re-addressed under a non-Congress Government and *Akash Bharati* was opened for reconsideration in 1989. Subsequently the *Prasar Bharati Bill* was produced before the

Government. In 2000, the Prasar Bharati Review Committee was set up, and it emphasized the close association between the public and the public service provider. Till date this problem remains unresolved since the country still awaits a comprehensive media policy and a media law that will enable the democratization of media. The Broadcast Bill (draft 2007) awaits final approval. It has been widely circulated for comments by the Government. In the mean time the groups utilizing community radio remain the only hope for the marginalized in the country.

Community radio as a non-state, non-market venture, owned and managed by the community is relatively a new idea in the country. Various countries have successfully utilized this means of planning and development of marginalized communities and in emulation of the same in 2002 the initiative for revamping broadcasting initiatives was undertaken, and eventually a newly conceptualized 'community radio' concept was born. The UNDP and UNESCO have been strongly advocating for the initiation of such a concept, and the representative of the former in India emphasized that the efforts "reflect the responsiveness of Government to the voices of those who believed passionately in the power of Community radio, demonstrating that a small network of committed people can make a difference".<sup>4</sup> Needless to say such views have been the prime movers behind the initiatives taken by the GOI today.

The idea of using the radio for empowerment caught on very well and was used in the backdrop of participatory approaches to development that were popularized by the rise of new social movements and NGOs. It has subsequently been shown through world wide research that gender is a significant dimension in community radio initiatives, launched by community based organizations that seek to bring about social change.

Various factors differentiate a community radio from other forms of broadcasting, namely public or commercial. The declarations of the Seventh World Congress of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) perhaps were the most influential in inspiring the approach towards this form of empowerment of the marginalized people in India. "The rights of indigenous people should be respected in their struggles for access and participation in communications media; the democratic participation of women in communications media should be guaranteed at all levels." (AMARC, 1998, the Milan Declaration on communication and Human Rights)<sup>5</sup> It caters to a group of people with common interests; they can run it as well, for instance the women's groups in the Deccan imparting their expertise gained in farming to nearby villages through the programmes run by the Deccan Development Society (DDA). The ultimate objectives are definitely to bring about changes in the targeted communities.

Even though Government efforts to use the popular medium of the radio to reach the marginalized started in real earnest around the 1980s, it was only on November 16, 2006, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting,

Government of India, opened up the airwaves for community-based FM broadcasting. In a new draft policy, the Ministry allowed a non profit organization (with minimum three years of registration and service in the community) to apply for permission to broadcast FM community based programming. India is perhaps the first country in South and South East Asia to have a separate Community Radio Policy.<sup>6</sup>

Disseminating information and education, capacity-building efforts, strengthening grassroots democracy, reaching out to marginalized communities; preserving their traditional culture—all this forms part of the efforts successfully entered into by other countries, using the 'community radio' approach.

## II

There is a growing body of literature produced by various research institutes and by independent researches as well to capture the voices of the marginalized through other means, as for instance through the written form. Mention may be made of the remarkable work done by the Centre for Dalit studies; the publication house Kali for Women and its latest affiliate *Zubaan*. The latter particularly has a tremendously radical agenda in highlighting hitherto unheard voices. Yet, the lacuna was still perceived of a media, prioritizing the rural women, physically as well as mentally distanced from the nuances of urban policy making aimed at participatory governance. It is here that broadcast policy becomes significant.

A brief review of the literature recounting the progress made with using the media as an instrument for narrating the voices of the marginalized particularly the woman is done here. A search through a well-stocked library shows the following works, which have been produced lately. the most comprehensive work so far has been the edited two-volume work by Kiran Prasad (2004) *Communication and Empowerment of Women: Strategies and Policy Insights from India*. She shows how the National Policy for Women's empowerment (2001) had as one of its objectives to remove demeaning, degrading and negative conventional images of women. She rightly indicates that before empowerment of women can be achieved it is necessary to enable women to give voice to their experiences and for society to understand them as human beings and react to them with sensitivity (p.41). One realizes that the inverse ratio between violence against women and the growth of the ICT sector is widening and not abating as expected, this is because a purposive 'silencing' of woman has occurred with systematic vigour over the ages. Carolyn Stewart Dyer purposively tackles this in her "Listening to Woman's Stories (1993). She takes an overtly pro-feminist stance and finds that the wrongs emanate from the existing 'media law'. "The feminist challenge to media law is to find a means of protecting expression that values all expression and that treats women and other outsiders as if they matter..." (1993:334). An



interesting work done sometime earlier is *The Mass media and Village Life: An Indian Study* (1989), the product of research by the trio Paul Hartmann, BR Patil, and Anita Dighe. The basic query raised here is how can communication be used to bring change in the lives of the villagers, if it remains state controlled and its reach, mainly the urban space, leaving the rural people comparatively deprived. Case studies from rural spaces including West Bengal show the same results. An interesting work by Rekha Bhagat, and P.N. Mathur underlines the type of change noticeable in the lives of rural women surrounding Delhi. The proximity to the metropolis does not really reflect the true rural picture of the women they are fascinated with the lifestyles of their urban counterparts and emulation of the same becomes a prime engagement. In their work *Mass Media and Farm Women* (1989) they reveal that indeed increasing media utilization by rural women is noticeable. Whether their voices/abilities to countenance social deprivation have been strengthened has not been measured. They exchange information on farm products, share knowledge on clothes, cosmetics and so on in emulation of their urban counterparts. How far they are able to countenance domestic violence is not known. Pavrala and Malik (2007) *Other Voices, the Struggle for Community Radio in India*, constitutes the latest volume on the issue and this encapsulates more specifically the policy, and intended objectives for the marginalized in the country. It brings out succinctly the interface between community radio and the role it can play in revitalizing civil society.

### III

The Kalyani University Institute of Mass Communication Film and Television Studies (IMCFTS) started the radio programme 'Kalyani' under the Government communication policy to allow entry of universities to run radio programmes to benefit the rural masses. The programme ran for almost a whole year from December 2004—September 2005. Even though the policy on Community Radio of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting was brought into effect in 2006, the programme launched by the IMCFTS actually preceded the policy itself. The intention was to run the programme in such a way that a 'community of listeners' would automatically build around it.

The present Rector/Hony Secretary of the Institute Prof Shyamal Sengupta (interview 2/4/08) described in great details the objectives behind the broadcast venture. The erstwhile Vice Chancellor of Kalyani University Prof Nityananda Saha and his successor Professor Alok Banerjee were the prime movers behind the endeavour. The intentions were to engage the student community affiliated with the Department of Mass Communications with the programme to be aired through All India Radio. It was meant to build up a relationship with the rural dwellers, shape the programme in accordance with their requests; give voice to their pent up desires; on the whole provide a platform for people, otherwise invisible and also without any means of public expression. *Kalyani*, thus

became a twenty-five minutes programme running for five days in a week, it was aired in the afternoon, from 2, 0'clock onwards, the time the ruralite broke off for midday rest.

"Andarer pasra khulte pare" was the vision behind the venture. For this purpose a larger repertoire of responses from the listeners' was gradually built into the programme. The people were encouraged to write in not only in response to the programme but on anything they wished to share. Surprising intellectual content was revealed in the letters. Remote villages housed individuals very familiar with obscure English poets and their works; similarly a wealth of knowledge regarding herbicides; herb related cures; environmental degradation; water management and other extremely useful information was provided by the villagers through regular letters to the Institute, in response to the programme. A novel feature observed after a few weeks of the running of the programme was the connectivity developed between the villages; the programme was used to convey information sought by people dwelling in other villages, by the person writing in, the programme organizers became only the medium facilitating such interconnectivity. It became truly a 'community radio'.

The audience ranged from school children to retired people. Women unexpectedly turned out to be the most avid listeners of the programme. The nature of their letters revealed the multifarious involvement they experienced with the programme. Above all, the most noticeable feature was the intense appropriation and subjective alignment professed by the listeners. To the listeners the programme came to symbolize a person named *Kalyani*, with whom the could communicate on a no-holds barred basis.

The Institute readied the entire programme for each day at its precincts, copied it into a disk and sent to the AIR, Kolkata for broadcast through its channel A at the appropriate time. We could gain access to almost all the CDs encapsulating the programmes broadcast throughout 2005. the discs being too numerous to analyze in detail we provide a bird's eye view of the contents, that helps to evaluate the listener-response given later. The responses raise questions as to how a programme meant to be an objective, informative community radio broadcast is appropriated and gradually symbolizes a person towards whom passionate attachment is evinced.

The programme each day started with a jingle eulogizing the University's effort at dissemination of knowledge; this was followed by a short reading by the Rector cum Hony Secretary, Prof Shyamal Sengupta, named 'thought for the day' (*diner bhabna*). It comprised quotes usually from Tagore; quite often this set the mood for the rest of the programme. For instance the programme broadcast on 15 August 2005, started with Tagore's "He durbhagya Desh..." (O unfortunate country...) similarly on the festival of rakhi on 19 August 2005, the focus was on the festival itself. Shyamal Sengupta's reading was from Tagore's "*Gaye amar pulak lage, chokhe jalaye ghor, Hridaye mor*

*ke bendeche ranga rakhir dor...*" (Happiness touches my body, my eyes are entranced, who has tied the coloured strings of the *rakhi* around my heart?).

*Diner Bhabna* was followed by the quiz *Mritunjayee*. It was a historical quiz component where the listeners were provided with at least three clues symbolizing a particular person in history, Indian or world history. The listeners were asked to identify the person. This gradually became the most popular component since the listeners answered the quiz with the sole objective of hearing their names over the air if they answered correctly. One person was promised a prize from among the correct respondents, provided the person's name was selected by a lottery. As we read the letters it became evident that the idea of being categorized among the prize winners was evidently more significant than the prize itself, quite often those lodged in extremely remote villages never received their prizes, but there was no remorse whatsoever!

We were a bit surprised at the nature of the questions asked in the slot *Mritunjayee*. For instance the programme on the 16 August 2005 gave the following clues: The person was the editor of the *Bengali Patrika*; (b) authored *A Nation in the Making*; (c) since 1918, the person was a member of the moderate party. These were surely intended for the educated sections of society, and not the disempowered, underprivileged ruralites. *Kalyani* in course of a single year could build up a reputation for being an extremely informative educational programme. The response rate was remarkable, thirty-one people responded to the questions broadcast on 16 August and 50 for the one broadcast on 17 August. Needless to say a majority of the questions were correct.

Apart from the quiz, various other innovative features had been tried out, such as giving listeners a story line and asking them to complete it. Quite often certain historical luminaries were remembered in the section entitled *Saraniya/barania* and unusual or little known facts from their lives were narrated. Tagore's eulogy of *rakhi bandhan*; Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's fascination and later cultivation of homeopathy treatment; excerpts from the life of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. These narrations took up a significant portion of the programme. The main component of the programme was thus intensely integrative, information relating to episodes on nation-building and those involved with the same seemed to be the motive. If one had to be empowered, both the ideology and the role models were clear.

On an average about thirty five to fifty letters were received every day. We could salvage around 500 letters for evaluation purposes from the thousands that lay in the library of the institute. Most of the other letters were damaged by the seepage of rain water. It was difficult to say whether easy questions elicited the most response or the difficult ones, apart from the response to quiz or general history based questions, there were questions on literature, on media and so on.

A sample of letters from female listeners' shows that through limited use of words, the efforts to convey a whole wealth of feelings and perceptions

was manifest. Most surprising is the number of letters received from Bengali Muslim women from the districts around Kolkata. At least thirty percent of the letters were from women and of them another thirty five percent were from Muslims women. Apart from them considerable numbers of women from across the border from Bangladesh became regular correspondents. The depth of feeling expressed, the relationship affirmed and the profound gratitude declared for the simple recognition accorded by the broadcasters revealed the extent of passionate attachment developed towards the programme. The letter writer seemed to revel in the new identity accorded to her through the mere mention of her name through the airwaves and Kalyani was the elusive golden wand that awakened life within her!

A slight pique was however visible in the letters from across the border. They perceived 'a step motherly' attitude. The query was, being foreign listeners, were they automatically debarred from participating in the competitive sections of the programme? They never received any 'prizes', as did the Indian listeners! Yet, the attachment evinced towards the programme was profound:

"You have granted me recognition of a nature unimaginable in my life! I have a friend now and that feeling cannot be expressed through words!" The letter writer extends heartfelt invitation to all associated with the programme to visit Bangladesh in the winter.

The summers and the monsoon are unbearable. By the crossing of boundaries you have accepted the other as your own; I am overwhelmed by this attitude. You have imparted undefined love, unlimited knowledge and huge entertainment. Such bestowal cannot fade away, but will be kept alive by the common heartbeats of the thousands who are similar recipients of the munificence of the programme. Like the limitless twinkling of the stars in the evening sky and the forceful rays of the sun during the daylight hours, your light will continue to shine. I will catch sight of you behind rain-drenched clouds; or you will come to me as a breath of cool fresh air on a sultry afternoon! You can never fade away! I will keep you alive with my very being! You are the lodestar of my life.<sup>7</sup>

This lengthy quote from an epistle indicates the nature of communication entered into by the women, in many instances from the Muslim community. This could well be described as a lover's note to her beloved. Similar letters from others were also to be found. The programme to all intents signified a person, who could be addressed in extremely individualized tones. That it was meant to be a campus broadcast falling under the initiatives for community radio was not visible from the nature of the responses. It can well be deduced that the constructed formalisms of interpersonal social communication consciously created and upheld by society, constrict the flow of such intimate

feelings particularly from the female towards another person in normal social relationships. The invisibility accorded by the airwaves removed such constructed barriers.

It was not the outpouring of tremendous affection finding an unforeseen, yet necessary outlet, but the simple childlike association of *Kalyani* with the everyday in the life of a women ensconced in some rural hamlet that becomes fascinating. *Kalyani* became the 'buffer' that bore the unleashing of the pent up emotions of the writer. The very anonymity of the endeavour strengthened the voice. Many letter writers expressed that "feelings of emptiness, of something amiss or even a nagging feeling of tremendous loss" persisted throughout the day if they somehow missed the programme on a particular day.

On the other had the voices of the teenagers were more endearing. They discussed their activities at school; of how *Kalyani* had become an essential part of their daily life. Even though they were often absent from home when it was aired, it was all the more exciting to receive the knowledge from a privileged listener. Sharing of the knowledge gained in the academic institution with *Kalyani* and vice versa, showed the keenness with which the programme was followed.<sup>8</sup>

The correspondence from the male viewers reveals very interesting positions. A simple categorization shows they could fall within a number of clear-cut categories. *First* the identity seekers, that *Kalyani* offered recognition of various sorts could be perceived. Some letter writers, in this case particularly the males were very conscious that the name of the letter writer, followed by the district was not really enough to identify the person per se. The name of the village was essential, in many cases the villages were the residences of eminent literatures, historians or other notables, the letter writer's desire to be aligned with these persons could be observed.<sup>9</sup> Others were plainly suggestive, asking for alternative timings; nighttime broadcasts were preferred inclusive of Sundays and Saturdays, to allow all of them to participate in it. They also desired to be a part of the broadcasters, and some expressed plaintively whether their marks would allow admission into the Institute. A *third* category revealed the latent talents among the correspondents, they engaged in poetics, sent in literary pieces, shared important information and such.<sup>10</sup>

A *fourth* category comprised the self-proclaimed 'outsider' in this case the pique was similar to that expressed by women hailing from a different geographical location than West Bengal. Listeners from Jharkhand, and Orissa, were prominent in this category. The aged lonely listener's voice was perhaps the most pathetic. Having lost all family members, there was no more any reason to live, but *Kalyani* embodied the hope, the reason and the motive to live! Surprising declarations from rationally thinking males! Such were the heart rending as well as, at times extremely bold avowals from the males. The latter category however can be classified separately altogether, as 'the plain

obsessed'. *Kalyani* could have been the elusive female they never wooed in reality. This flow of emotion was indeed surprising since the broadcasters usually were a group of men and women! The degree of obsession was indeed very evident, since this was one of the largest categories of letter writers among the males. Amidst all this outpouring of passion, grief, faith, hope, ambition and desire there was the earnest plea that the programme should not wind up.

This eventuality, of impending closure however, gradually dawned with increasing urgency upon the broadcasters and was duly conveyed to their huge community of listeners in West Bengal and elsewhere. The outpouring of grief and affinity was unimaginable; the information was akin to the impending demise of a loved being! Subsequently there was a surge of opinion on how to keep the programme afloat. The main reason as conveyed by the Hony. Secretary of the Institute was pecuniary constrictions. An amount of Rupees twelve hundred had to be paid daily to the All India Radio for the Use of Channel A to broadcast the 25-minute programme and that became a burden impossible to be borne. No financial aid was forthcoming from either the UGC or any other institution. Infact towards the end, the broadcasters revealed their own desperation. The need for financial help was voiced quite openly. The students involved with the running of the programme collected around Rupees 12000/- and that was cited everyday as an instance of the nature of help that could be rendered. To this repeated announcement of the dire distress, which had afflicted *Kalyani*, the response was enormous. Rural Bengal however could not sustain the program through its monetary contributions; the surplus required for the same was simply not there. However, it was heart-rending to read that varied degrees of largesse were projected. This in response to what the ruralites had gained from the programme. A Muslim, father of five daughters of marriageable age came to the institute with his offering of Rupees 2000/-, similarly others came forward with their mite. But despite this collective show of empathy, the program eventually closed down.

### Conclusion

Significant questions can be raised in our concluding section, one relating to the ultimate utility of such programmes or the question of empowerment achieved; and secondly to what extent is autonomy sustained at the grassroots level, particularly in areas such as broadcasting? Thirdly, does state intervention become inevitable; and associated to this, is the curbing of the flow of voices representing the unclaspings of the flood gates of the repressed everyday, also inevitable? After all empowerment in common parlance relates to certain measurable indicators, visible in the fields of health, numbers passing out of visible educational institutions, numbers employed and so on. It connotes a degree of formalism in the output of policies, anything not consonant with such formalism is redundant. The sheer volume of letters received and the tone in

which they were expressed proclaim beyond doubt the functions the programme performed in the lives of the community of listeners built around it.

There is no way of ascertaining whether the transformation many perceived while corresponding with the institute has continued over the years. Both the sexes expressed profoundly how they imbibed immense life-sustaining elements from the programme. There was a spontaneous circle of empathy realized at the individual level which government-run programmes find hard to achieve. Set targets, set issues, deny the space to the listener to project the kind of subjective upsurge visible in this case. State intervention and the curbing of the spontaneous response from the listener, becomes inevitable unless broadcast policy is rooted in greater decentralization. Most significant of all perhaps the notion of objective, measurable indices of empowerment handed down by the World Bank has to be recast. All endeavours from the state need not have the same visible, objective impact.

At this point it is worthwhile to briefly look at some of the most popular community radio programmes aired in the country and the type of responses elicited from the community they served. The Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan's (KMVS) efforts to run a series of participatory programmes in association with the Ahmedabad based *Drishti Media* is an instance of all out success. The women laud its informative content and the change wrought in their productive endeavours through its broadcast. Their associations and organizations, the Mahila Mandals spur them on to participate more fully in the broadcasts, and it is managed by the local women today. This unit was recently handed the Chameli Devi Jain Award, 2001. The programme broadcast by the unit became extremely popular since it was oriented towards highlighting the need for information of the women. This was community radio at its best. (Kanchan Kumar, 2003).

Yet, data gathered from the Jharkhand community of listeners' does not reveal either the extent of passionate involvement as experienced by women respondents of the IMCFTS, nor was it equivalent to the claims for successful change voiced by the Kutchi women. Pavrala and Malik in their case study of this programme report some of the responses given by the latter community to their reception of the programme: "Yaad nahin rahta" (We do not remember); or "men should not be around when the programme is aired". On the whole they preferred bhajans and folk songs, which were not aired by the broadcasters; there was tussle between the male viewers and the women, the former expressed irritation at the women's desire to listen in. In other words, the strangle hold of patriarchy prevented fuller participation of the women in the programme.

The forward linkages built up by the Kutchi community, including the Mahila Mandals of the region proved to be extremely influential in effecting changes in the area through community broadcasts. Similar 'change' was absent in visible form in the case of the programme broadcast by IMCFTS; since the

same collective approach was never envisaged at the grassroots level, the programme remained at best a 'campus broadcast' and not a true 'community broadcast'. Yet, the degree of attachment expressed through the thousands of letters written by the community of listeners substantiates our earlier supposition that it is not a monolithic measure of empowered voices that becomes visible, but its multifarious forms.

We had begun with a quote from the radio journalist from El Salvador, Jose Lopez. His book *Rebel Radio* draws attention to the multifarious need or functions that a community radio is supposed to perform. Their radio was used to surreptitiously draw the attention of the El Salvadorians towards holistic transformation/rebellion in society, women were not to be passive onlookers but actual participants in the change, and subsequently the oppressed people were drawn towards protest and rebellion. Our narration shows the anti-climax of this method of change or empowerment, it belies universalism of the process and sets up its own processes of intellectual cognition.

The author expresses her gratefulness to Chandrani Bagchi, who helped with the classification of the hundreds of letters handed over to us by the director of the Kalyani Institute of Mass Communication, Film and Television Studies (KIMCFTS). My thanks are also to two others, Prof Sushanta Mahapatra of KIMCFTS for providing the preliminary incentives to undertake this writing and the Hon'ble Sec. Prof. Shyamal Sengupta for patiently providing all the relevant information relating to the actual running of the programme.

### Primary Sources:

1. Audio CDs from the KIMCFTS, with the recorded programmes, February to September 2005.
2. Letters, from the respondents, February to September 2005 (selected).
3. Interview of Prof. Shyamal Sengupta, April, 2008 at the KIMCFTS.
4. Laxmi Murthy (2003) Interview of Urvashi Butalia, "Foregrounding women's voices" In *InfoChange News & Features*, December.

### Secondary Sources

- Begum, Anwara (2008), *Magical Shadows, Women in the Bangladesh Media*, New Delhi: South Asian Publishers.
- Bhagat, Rekha, P.N. Mathur (1984) *Mass Media and Farm Women* New Delhi: Intellectual Publishing House.
- Datta Gupta, Sharmistha (2007) *Pather Ingit, Nirbachita Sangbad - Samayik Patre Bangali Meyer Samajbhavna 1927-1967 (The Way ahead: Political Writings of Bengali Women in Select Periodicals 1927-1967)* Stree: Kolkata.
- Dyer, Carolyn Stewart (1993) "Listening to Women's Stories or Media Law as if Women Mattered" In Pamela J. Creedon ed. *Women in Mass Communication* London etc: Sage.
- Ghadiyally, Rehana Ed (2007) *Urban Women in Contemporary India A Reader*, New Delhi: Sage.



Hartman Paul, B.R., Patil, Dighe, Anita (1989) *The Mass Media and Village Life: An Indian Study* New Delhi: Sage

Kumar, Kanchan (2003) Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan (KMVS) *Community Radio initiative: A Case Study-Some Preliminary Observations' Paper presented at the UNDP Consultation on ICTs and Development*, 11 March, Bangalore: IIM

Pavrala, Vinod and Malik, Kanchan K. (2007) *Other Voices The Struggle for Community Radio in India*, New Delhi etc: Sage Publications

Prasad, Kiran ED. (2004) *Communication and Empowerment of Women: Strategies and Policy Insights from India* Delhi: The Women's Press in 2 volumes ..... "Rethinking Communication Policies and Empowerment of Women in India" in Ibid. pp. 3-60.

Saima Saeed, *Community Radio. Policies, Power and Possibilities*, PDF file accessed, 10 May 2008.

## Notes and References

1. My entry into this research was quite by chance. The erstwhile director of the KIMCFTS first drew my attention towards the wealth of information available with their institute in the form of letters, quite a number from women, in response to the programme aired by them. Not knowing what to do with them he asked me whether they would be of interest to me. This research thus, is an effort to try out yet another dimension of query, to add on to the slowly growing literature on the 'elusive' women's voice that feminists of all genres engage with through various research methods. A second point of entry is in keeping with the DRS trend to evaluate 'governance' and policies affected as a result of the same. Other efforts at implementing Community Radio by educational institutions in West Bengal are also visible, for instance the programme running under the name *Chitrabani* broadcast under the aegis of the Department of Mass Communications, St Xavier's College, Kolkata, for the last twenty five years. The actual broadcasting has shifted to Manila, Philippines. Since data for these ventures are still being processed, this paper aims at being informative and remains at the 'working paper' stage. The translations are my own.
2. The Standing Committee on the Empowerment of Women set up on 8th March 1996, identified basically 9 subjects all of which fell under measurable indicators. They were: (i) Functioning of National and State Commissions for Women (ii) Women in Detention (iii) health and Family Welfare Programms for Women (iv) Functioning of Family Courts (v) Education Programms for Women (vi) Training Programmes for Women (vii) Training and Empowerment of Women in Local Bodies (viii) Violence against Women during Riots (ix) Economic Empowerment of Women. The concept and endeavour highlighting voices of women actually became popular with the growth of radical critique against liberal constitutional efforts to bring about visible, measurable change.
3. <http://www.allindiaradio.org/index.html> accessed 30 April 2008.
4. UNDP, (2004) "Strong UNDP-UNESCO Backing to India's Efforts for New Community Radio Policy", 6th May, 2008.

5. <http://freestone.com/kpfa/milanddeclaration.html> accessed, 5 May 2008.
6. UNDP (2006) "Empowerment for human Development" Some of the terms mentioned in the draft were: (1) Broadcast of *news and current affairs is prohibited by the Community Radio Station (CRS)* (2) All content on the CRS must be for community development and in the best interests of the community (3) A minimum of *50% of content on the CRS must be locally produced with community participation* (4) All transmission equipment has to be purchased from authorized vendors only (5) Five minutes of advertising per hour is permitted on the CRS (6) The CRS must have *a community based management board*. The UNDP policy was typified as "empowerment for human development".
7. Letter from Jihan Ashraf Tanu, 29.08.2005, Mahespur, Bangladesh. The same person however sends an extremely formal letter asking why her name was not announced along with others who had correctly answered the quiz questions. Letter 13.09.05.
8. Letter from Chinmaye Bhunya, Basantapur, West Medinipur, 27.08.05; Asha Karmakar, Baki, Bankura, 06.09.05 and others.
9. For instance the letter by Debangshu Patra, Written from Dangarampur, village District Bankura 08.09.2005.

## BOOK REVIEW

**Marta Harnecker, *Rebuilding the Left*, Daanish Books, Delhi, 2007, Rs. 195.**

The eminent Marxist historian, Eric Hobsbawm, concluded his *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991* with a sad note. He lamented that the “old century has not ended well” and argued that with the collapse of USSR the experiment of “really existing socialism” came to an end. The legacy of Soviet Socialism as summarized by Hobsbawm is quite gloomy: “The tragedy of the October Revolution was precisely that it could only produce its kind of ruthless, brutal, command socialism”.

Marta Harnecker’s book gives us hope that an alternative left politics is possible in the age of neoliberalism. The book opens with a characterization of the profound changes in the new world. To put it in her own words:

*Capital today not only moves into the most remote parts of the world — as it has been doing since the sixteenth century—but is capable of functioning, in real time and on a planetary scale, as a single unit. Vast quantities of money—billions of dollars—are transferred in seconds by electronic circuits which link the financial world.*

Harnecker argues that the neo-liberal model imposed on the world is incapable of solving the people’s most pressing problems. In fact, the neo-liberal policies followed by different countries of the world have created “profound discontent among much of humankind”. The author believes that profundity of the crisis created by neoliberalism prepares the ground towards the creation of an alternative social block.

Before offering her own blueprint of the new social block, Harnecker has pointed out the limitations of traditional left politics in the context of Latin America. She argues that the Latin American Left applied European class analysis to countries whose populations were mostly indigenous and overlooked the importance of ethno-cultural factors. The most important explanation for the Left’s “crisis of theory”, argues Harnecker, is the lack of a critical study of late twentieth-century capitalism—the capitalism of the electronic information revolution, of globalization and financial wars. The author has also talked about a crisis of the credibility of politics and politicians, including political parties. In this context she notes that the Left has lost credibility because its political practice fails to stand out from the usual practice being followed by the Right: cutting welfare, attacking unions, supporting and conducting foreign wars.

Harnecker argues that the “organic crisis” of the Left has a lot to do with

an uncritical copying of the Bolshevik model of the party. One of the major errors was to conceive the party as a *working-class* party (because that was considered to be the only revolutionary class). This alienated the Left from the people:

*The acritical emphasis placed on the working class led to Latin American parties ignoring the specific characteristics of that continent's revolutionary social subject and failing to understand the role that indigenous people and Christians can play in revolutions in Latin America.*

Another theoretical assumption of Left politics was to locate power only in the state. So the parties inspired by the Bolshevik Party concentrated all their efforts on preparing to storm these bastions and ignored other aspects of the struggle, such as the task of culturally transforming people's consciousness. Moreover, the Left preached "vanguardism" in their functioning:

*The leadership cadres were the people who knew where to go, and therefore decisions about everything that was done were handed down ready-made from above. It was assumed that anything the leadership thought was right, and therefore that the members simply had to carry out the instructions handed down.*

In spite of dismal performance of the Left on many counts, Harnecker is not mentally inclined to give farewell to all kinds of organized politics like the postmodernists. She earnestly believes that politics is the "art of making the impossible possible". She is of the opinion that we need a political organization for unifying and coordinating various emancipatory practices. In her conceptualization of the alternative social block against the neo-liberal regime, she has included both the 'party Left' and the 'social Left'—the social actors and movements which are trying to create autonomous spaces.

Harnecker defines activism as a way of life and laments that the political importance of everyday life has been undervalued for a long time. Her down-to-earth approach to politics has propelled her to argue that we must learn to listen to people before formulating our political strategies. Harnecker's seminal discourse on politics ends with an analysis of the possibilities of the Bolivarian Revolutionary Process.

It is true that Harnecker's interrogation of Left politics is situated in the Latin American perspective. But the critical questions raised in her discourse should act as a eye-opener to the Left in general if they really believe that politics is "the art of making the impossible possible".

**Arup Kumar Sen**  
Department of Commerce  
Serampore College

**William A. Pelz: *Against Capitalism. The European Left on the March*** (New York: Peter Lang, 2007). 159 + ix Pages.

Living in a time dominated by scepticism towards history, the latter being considered as a grand narrative, the above title may at once provoke derision, if not laughter, in certain quarters. Understandably, after the demise of the USSR the orthodox Marxist Left is certainly on the backfoot and the ideological baggage of Marxism is no longer regarded by a section of the Left intelligentsia as an exciting intellectual tool for understanding society, since the very agenda of Marxism is considered by many among the Left today as *passee*. Viewed in this context, the present book, authored by a distinguished American labour historian, who has over the years written extensively on various aspects of revolutionary working class movement in Europe and the United States, falls outside the purview of today's mainstream historical publications and discussions, where Left movements and, especially, issues relating to working class history, normally find their place in footnotes. The intention of the author is, however, unambiguously clear, the book having been "dedicated to all those ordinary women and men, whose names are now lost to history, who struggled for a more just, equal world".

It is a slim volume written in a narrative style, which makes it an absorbing reading, yet providing real food for thought, since the author does not allow his analysis of this crucial phase of modern European history clouded by any prejudiced judgement. Commitment as well as criticality pervade the narrative. Divided in six main chapters it covers the formative years of the European Left, namely, 1864-1921, ideologically and organizationally. The book takes off with the formation of the First International in 1864, its impact on the rise of working class movement in Europe, the Paris Commune, its achievements, collapse and significance, rise of trade unions and working class parties across Europe in its wake, headed by the formation of the German social Democratic Party (SPD) in 1875, the founding of the Second International (1889-1914) and the growth of European radicalism, as manifest in the debates that rocked the SPD and the Second International, leading to the ultimate schism between the Marxists, who believed in revolutionary emancipation of labour, and the reformists, who stuck to the path of reforms. Besides, there was the challenge of the Anarchists and the Syndicalists. The author rightly sums up the scenario (pp. 63-64) by identifying the distinctive tendencies that marked the European Left at the end of the nineteenth century. One: the wing led by Bernstein and his followers, which had permanently abandoned the path of revolution. Two : the largest single tendency within the Left represented by the "centrists", who believed in revolutionary transformation of society although through the existing institutions, by mobilizing labour organizations. Three : the minority of "resolute

revolutionaries” who rejected the above positions; divided in two groups they constituted the revolutionary socialists who defended the cause of a workers’ state and the Anarchists who vowed to put an end to all governmental power. The author then moves through the early years of the twentieth century, the First World War and the Russian Revolution constituting the two main flashpoints, and examines how the European Left was ideologically polarized on questions of War and colonialism. Finally, the book examines the momentous impact of the Russian Revolution on the growth of revolutionary working class movements across Europe in the period after the War and the repression unleashed by the ruling classes against these movements, which, indeed, posed a threat to the regimes in power. The study ends at this point, the emergence of fascism and its consequent impact on working class movement falling outside the scope of the book.

It goes without saying that it is extremely difficult to narrate the story of what happened in history in this tumultuous era of modern Europe in a compact manner, the period being quite vast, complex and multi-dimensional. The book aims to enlighten the general reader and this probably explains why he has refrained from examining the scholarly studies of this period, provided in the past by some of the leading historians of our time. This, however, has been compensated by the annotated and fully up to date bibliography given at the end under the heading “For Further Reading”, which the discerning reader would find extremely useful. While attempting to write a comprehensive history of such a sensitive period, the problem for the writer is sometimes to be trapped in his own convictions, when objectivity is overruled by faith, resulting in a somewhat blind vision that refuses to acknowledge the historical realities, howsoever unsavoury they might be. This, it needs to be emphasized, has not happened in the case of this book although the author’s Marxist inclination is beyond question.

In presenting a rather terse and concise narrative of what happened in the history of the European Left between the mid-nineteenth and the first two decades of the twentieth century, the author, quite obviously, has skipped details. But it is a narrative with a difference in the sense that it focuses on certain vital issues which grow out of this narrative. This, precisely, makes the reading so lucid as well as thought-provoking. First, the author has drawn our attention to the gender question involving the interplay of women workers, religion and politics as a vital yet neglected component in the struggle for socialism (pp. 34-36). Second, apart from the role played by prominent individuals and organizations in the shaping of the European Left, there remains the sensitive question of how the average European worker, steeped in tradition, viewed the political and ideological developments relating to socialism. That there was no unanimity, that the scenario was extremely complex and contradictory is evident from the author’s discussion of this problem through

## Book Review

interesting illustrations (pp. 59-62). Third, the author has attempted an objective appraisal of the revolutionary wing of the European Left by focusing not only on its achievements but also its weaknesses which stood in the way of its expansion (pp. 135-145). As regards the success story, indeed, it is the Revolutionary Left which for the first time raised high the questions of class, freedom, equality, gender and workers' rights. But what largely negated these achievements were, besides ideological divisions within the Left, other factors like neglect of the peasant question, anti-Semitism, racism and colonialism that characterized the mindset of the average European worker, together with the hold of religion on the worker's consciousness and the inept handling of the gender and sexuality question by the male-dominated Left leadership.

The book is small yet remarkably perceptive in its analysis. It can be put to appropriate use by the general reader, political activists as well as professional academics. It can be easily considered as a companion volume to such concise studies made in the past as George Lichtheim's *A Short History of Socialism* and Wolfgang Abendroth's *A Short History of The European Working Class*. While it is a contribution made in difficult times that confront the working class movement today, deserving thereby mention and attention, concerned readers would find interesting clues to a larger question involving the history of the European Left : what went wrong and why? In other words, it was a march alright but perhaps not necessarily always in the right direction.

**Sobhanlal Datta Gupta**  
Department of Political Science  
University of Calcutta

## FORM IV

Statement about ownership and other particulars in respect of the newspaper entitled The Calcutta Journal of Political Studies, Calcutta University, under Rule 8 of the Registration of Newspapers (Central) Rules 1956.

1. Place of Publication : Calcutta University, Alipore  
Campus, Kolkata – 700 027
2. Periodicity of Publication : Half-yearly
3. Name of the Publisher : Dr. Dhurjati Prasad De  
Nationality : Indian  
Address : Asutosh Building, Calcutta  
University, Kolkata – 700 073
4. Name of the Printer : Pradip Kumar Ghosh,  
Supt. Calcutta University Press  
Nationality : Indian  
Address : Calcutta University Press,  
48, Hazra Road,  
Kolkata-700 019
5. Name of the Editor : Professor Dipak Kumar Das  
Nationality : Indian  
Address : Department of Political Science  
Calcutta University, Alipore Campus  
Kolkata - 700 027
6. Owner's name and : Department of Political Science  
Address : Calcutta University, Alipore Campus  
Kolkata - 700 027

I do hereby declare that the statement made above is true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

28.03.2008

Dhurjati Prasad De  
*Publisher*



Registered with the Registrar of Newspapers for India

---

---

Published by Dr. Dhurjati Prasad De, Secretary of the University Colleges of Arts & Commerce, University of Calcutta and printed by Pradip Kumar Ghosh, Superintendent, Calcutta University Press, 48, Hazra Road, Kolkata-700 019

Copies are available at the Calcutta University Publication Sales Counter, Asutosh Building, College Street, Kolkata - 700 073.

Price : Rs. 50.00 per copy